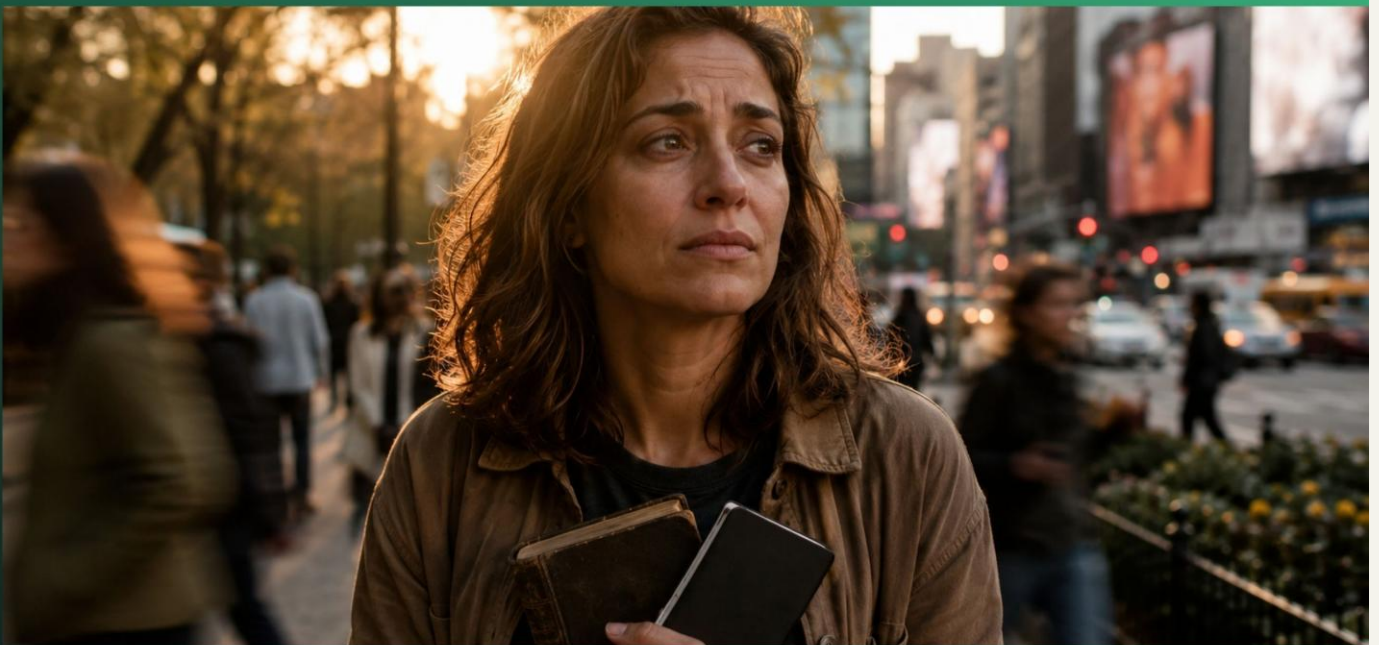


THE BELEAGUERED BELIEVER'S GUIDES

THE PATH OF THE **BELEAGUERED** BELIEVER



You are not losing your faith — you are
finding it under the noise.



faithoverfactions.com

FAITH OVER FACTIONS

The Path of the Beleaguered Believer

On what grows after you leave the noise



There is profound loneliness when you find yourself leaving a church assembly that you believed to be home: betrayal, anger, fear, loneliness, grief, doubt. Possibly all at once. It's as though everything you thought stable and trustworthy vanishes from beneath you. Your inside world — shattered and you don't know where to turn or what your next step is, yet still the spark of faith burns



A Word Before You Begin

This is not going to ask you for anything. Not your email, not your agreement, not your return to a building you can barely think about without your chest tightening. You can put it down at any line and nothing will chase you. I want

you to know that before you read another word, because you have spent a long time being asked for things by people who called the asking love.

So let me start with the fear instead of the pitch. Somewhere along the way you came to suspect that stepping back from church meant stepping away from God — that the distance you put between yourself and the noise was distance you put between yourself and Him. Almost everyone in your old world would have agreed with you. I want to say, as gently as I know how, that they were wrong. The thing you walked away from and the One you have been quietly praying to this whole time were never the same thing. They only ever used the same words.

One more thing before we walk. There is Scripture in these pages, and I know that for some of you a verse arriving on a page makes you cringe, because verses were used on you as instruments. When you encounter a verse here, be gentle with yourself. The flinch is not unbelief. It is a scar, and a scar is evidence of healing, not the absence of it. Skip any quotation you need to skip. Jesus is not keeping score, and neither am I.

You are somewhere on a path. Not at the end of one, and not, whatever it feels like, at a dead end. A path goes somewhere. That is what makes it a path and not a hole. You may be standing in a stretch that looks like nothing but cleared ground and grey sky, and you may have been standing there long enough to wonder if anything will ever grow again. I am not going to rush you out of that place. I am only going to walk in it beside you for a little while, and point — quietly, without pushing — at the green that is already coming up where you cannot yet see it.



What “Beleaguered” Means

Beleaguered is an old military word. It means besieged — surrounded, harassed from every side, worn down by trouble that will not let up. It is not a dramatic word. It describes what happens when the attacks keep coming from every direction until you are no longer sure you can hold the position.

That is what happens to a great many people who love Jesus but cannot be onboard with what is being done in His name. The hits come from everywhere at once. From the institution you are leaving. From the people who use the faith as a weapon. From family who believe you have lost your soul. From your own guilt at not being able to make it work. From the loneliness of stepping away. It is rarely one wound. It is the accumulated weight of all of it, pressing down until you understand, somewhere below words, that you cannot keep going the way you have been.

But here is what matters, and I want it to land before anything else does: a beleaguered believer is still a believer. You have not given up on Jesus. You may have given up on the machinery built around Him — and there is a world of difference between the two. You were told those were the same surrender. They are not. What looks from the outside like someone losing their faith is, more often, someone trying to find it again underneath all the noise.



You Might Be One of Us

Let me say back to you some of what you may have lived, so you know you are not imagining it and you are not alone in it.

If you still believe in Jesus but left an assembly because you could no longer hear Him over the church noise — you might be one of us.

If you are tired of being splattered with the mud that comes from mixing the faith with a political fight, slung around by people who treat it like a war they must win at all costs — you might be one of us.

If you sat among genuinely kind people who cared, and still felt like you did not fit, and no amount of warmth ever reached the part of you that knew it — you might be one of us.

If every time you tried to serve you got plugged into a slot, and you worked hard and smiled and did your best, and no one ever really saw you past what you could do for the machine — you might be one of us.

If you came to suspect the whole thing ran like a marketing funnel, with you as the target and the growth numbers mattering more than your actual soul — you might be one of us.

If you asked honest questions and got handled like a problem to be fixed instead of a person who thinks, and you learned that honesty in church was more dangerous than silence — you might be one of us.

If you are still untangling the shame they wrapped around your body and called holiness. If you were handed Scripture like a hammer and told the bruises were discipleship. If you live with an illness or a disability or a mind that will not cooperate, and you are weary of being treated like a prayer request instead of a person. If you watched how they treated the ones on the margins and something in you went quiet, because you knew that if they saw all of you, you would not be safe there either.

And if, after all of it, you still read the Gospels and feel something go right in your chest when you hear His words — even as your body locks up at the door of a sanctuary because it remembers what happened last time — then you might be one of us.

You are not faithless. You are not crazy. You stepped back from the noise to see if you could hear Him again. There are a lot of us out here on the edges, still holding on to Christ even when we do not fit the rooms that claim His name.



A Gentle Word About Words



You may find the first thing you begin to do following the emotional and spiritual onslaught of finding yourself solo. To disassemble everything you were taught.

There is a popular word for what you are going through. I do not use it, and I want to tell you why, because the reason is part of the hope.

The word is *“deconstruction”*. It comes from the work of taking a thing apart. And the taking apart is real — you have done some of it honestly, and you were not wrong to. But notice what the word does. It names only the dismantling. It has no second half. By its own grammar it describes a demolition and then stops, and a person can stand in that vocabulary for years, identifying with the rubble, calling the rubble home. The trouble is not that taking apart is wrong. The trouble is that a faith which only ever subtracts will, in the end, subtract itself down to nothing. Tearing down is not the goal. It was never meant to be where you live.

For the same reason I do not reach for the labels everyone offers next — *“progressive”*, *“ex-”*this, *“former”*-that. They sound like progress, but listen to what they actually do. One defines you forever by the house you left, chaining your new name to the old address. Another hands you the next faction to join, the next set of correct opinions to perform, the next room that will eventually besiege you for asking the wrong question from the other side. They are return tickets dressed as forward motion. You do not need a new label. The label is the old grammar. What we are after has a second half — not a tearing down, but a thing that grows.



The Former Things

There is a line that has been carried like a promise through a lot of broken lives:

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17, NLT

You have probably heard it aimed at the obvious things — the old habits, the old appetites, the past a person is glad to be rid of. But sit with it a moment longer than you were ever allowed to, because there is a former thing on that list almost no one will name for you. Sometimes the old life that has to pass away is the *religion* itself. Not Christ. Christ is the new life beginning. The thing that has to go is the machinery that stood in for Him and slowly took His place.

I want to say this carefully, because it is tender ground. What happens to people inside a controlling, performance-driven religion looks a great deal like what happens to people inside any other thing that gets its hooks in. There is the warmth of belonging, and then the shame when you fall short of it, and then the strange pull back toward the very place that shamed you, because it is the only place you have known relief. It asks for a little more each time to feel like enough. It calls your isolation devotion. If any of that was your experience, I am not here to diagnose you and I am not going to tell you what was done to you. I only want you to hear one thing: if you got caught in something like that, you were not weak. You were caught in something built to catch people. And you can walk out of the religion and toward Christ in the very same breath. Those were never the same direction. Leaving the one was never leaving the other.

And some wounds are the kind a booklet cannot reach. If what happened left marks on your sleep, your body, your ability to trust anyone at all, then hear this with no shame anywhere in it: sitting down with a good counselor — especially one who understands religious trauma — is not weakness, and it is not worldliness, whatever you were taught. Your body and your mind are part of the creation He called good. Tending them is not a detour from the path. It is the path.

And if part of you is unsure whether the wound was even real — whether you are making too much of it, whether it was only how it *felt* — then hear this too. It was real to you. That is enough. You are loved exactly the same either way.



Whatever experiences brought you here, they were real to you. The important thing is you are here. There is no expectation that a booklet will heal the wounds. Religious trauma is real. There is no shame or backsliding in talking to a professional counselor who is trained in it.



The Clearing



What you're walking through may look and feel like a lonely wasteland. But a desert journey has often been the way God leads us to clarity, to see growth in hidden places.

The question you are facing was never whether to keep believing in Jesus. That part is settled, or you would not still be reading. The question is how to hold that faith when the structures meant to support it became the things in the way. How do you follow someone who spent his life with people on the margins, when the institution carrying his name keeps pushing people *to* those margins? How do you read his invitation to the weary and then watch church become one more place that leaves people wearier?

The honest answer is that the problem is not mainly theological. It is structural. The machinery of institutional Christianity has its own momentum, its own appetites, its own instinct to survive — and those do not always line up with the teachings of the One it points to. Buildings need money. Programs need volunteers. Growth needs numbers. None of that is evil on its face. But it

creates a steady pressure that turns people into resources and faith into performance, and you felt that pressure long before you had words for it.

So what looks like destruction may be something quieter and more necessary. You did not tear the old thing down for sport. You were finding out, under terrible strain, which timbers were load-bearing and which had been rot the whole time. That is grief, and it deserves to be grieved. But it is also clearing. And here is the thing worth noticing about where you have ended up: the edges might be exactly where you belong. He spent most of his time there — with the outcasts and the sick, the unwelcome and the unclean, the very people the religious structures of his day had filed under “*problem*”. Being pushed to the edge does not mean you lost the way. It may mean you have stumbled onto the actual one — the path that led away from the temple as often as toward it, that put people over systems and mercy over machinery.

Still, cleared ground is not a home. It is not meant to be. It is where something can finally be planted.



The Winter That Isn't Death

Here is the hardest part, and I do not want to pass over it quickly. You may feel nothing growing. You pray and it goes quiet. You read and it does not catch the way it used to. You wait for some sign that faith is coming back to life in you, and the ground just lies there, bare. And you begin to wonder if the silence means it is gone for good.

And some nights it is not even silence. It is anger — at them, at yourself, at Him. You were probably taught that anger was the surest sign you had lost your way. But nearly a third of the Psalms are complaint and protest, kept in the canon on purpose, prayed by people who shook their fists at heaven and were called faithful for it. He was never afraid of your anger. Only the machinery was, because anger asks questions, and machinery cannot afford questions. So if anger is what you have tonight, pray the anger. Lament is not the opposite of faith. It is faith, refusing to leave the room.

Let me tell you what a seed knows. A seed in the dark looks exactly like nothing is happening. The most important work of its life takes place underground, unseen, before there is a single green thing to show anyone. Jesus said it plainly:

The seed sprouts and grows ... though he does not know how. The earth produces the crops on its own.

FROM MARK 4:27-28, NLT

On its own. Not by being commanded. Not by being dug up each week and inspected for progress, which only kills it. The bareness you are standing in may not be death at all. It may be winter — and winter is not the end of the garden, it is the part of the year that does its work in the dark. You are not behind. There is no schedule you are failing to keep. What feels like dormancy is very often just the growth you cannot see yet.

For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness.

ISAIAH 43:19, NLT

Already begun. And notice where He says He makes the path — in the wilderness. Which is to say, in exactly the kind of ground you are standing on. You do not have to see it yet for it to be true.

A New Creation, Not a Return



The journey of your faith's reconstruction doesn't circle back to what damaged you. The "old life" can be the bondage of a religious system that had other priorities than you.

And now the thing almost no one in this whole conversation will say to you: the goal was never to go back.

Read the promise again, and notice the last three words.

The old life is gone; a new life has begun.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17, NLT

Begun. Not finished, not arrived — *begun*. What grows after the clearing is not the old house rebuilt to code. You are not even the same person who walked out of it. So do not let anyone — least of all the tired voice in your own head — tell you the measure of healing is how quickly you can get back to where you were. There is no back. There is only forward, into something that has never existed before: the new life He is growing in you. Not a remodel of the old religion. Not a better faction. Not a fresh label. Something new.

And here is the mercy folded inside that. You are not the builder. You were never going to manufacture the new creation by effort, the way you were taught to manufacture everything else — the right feelings, the right fervor, the visible fruit on demand. Paul, who planted churches for a living, said it as plainly as it can be said:

I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow.

1 CORINTHIANS 3:6, NLT

The growth was never your assignment to produce. Your part is smaller and kinder than that: to stay in the light, to stay watered, to stay rooted — and to stop digging yourself up every few days to check. This is what He meant by the vine and the branches in John 15. *“Remain in me,”* he said, and then, *“apart from me you can do nothing.”* That is not a threat. To an exhausted person it is the most relieving sentence in the Gospels. It means you can stop straining. The life does not come from how hard the branch works. It comes from the vine, and your only task is to stay connected to it.

And in practice, staying connected can be almost embarrassingly small. One psalm in the morning. One honest sentence of prayer — even *“I have nothing today”* counts as prayer, and may be the truest one you have offered in years. A walk under open sky with Him. You were taught that faith had a minimum daily requirement. It does not. Smaller than you were taught still counts. It always counted.

If it helps, think of being born again the way the words actually run — as a birth, not a graduation. A newborn is completely, gloriously alive and can barely do a thing. That is not a failure of the newborn. That is what new life looks like at the beginning. So if your faith right now feels small and wordless and unable to perform, that may not be a sign that something is wrong. It may

be a sign that something is starting. The oak is already inside the acorn, true and whole, long before it is tall enough for anyone to see.



We Were Never Meant to Stay Solo



The journey may be long or short. Beware of the impulse to shop for a tribe. Fellowship has many forms, and discipleship comes outside of a label's classroom.

There is a quiet danger on this path, and because I love you enough to be honest, I am not going to leave it unsaid. The edges were a refuge. They were not meant to be an address.

Being alone with Jesus for a while may be exactly what you needed — a place to breathe, a place for the wound to close where no one could press on it. But a seed does not grow in an empty room. It grows in soil, in a garden, among other living things. A branch is not a branch off by itself; it is part of a vine. You were not made to do this alone forever, and the loneliness you sometimes

feel out here is not a personal failing. It is the homing instinct of a creature that was built for a body.

I know which verse is rising in you, because it was probably used on you like a leash:

Let us not neglect our meeting together ... but encourage one another.

FROM HEBREWS 10:25, NLT

You were handed that as a command to get back in the building or stand condemned. But read what it actually reaches for — encouragement, the carrying of one another, people who lift instead of grind. The problem was never gathering. The problem was *what you were told to gather into*. You left a counterfeit of the body of Christ. That does not make the body itself a counterfeit. And the real thing does not require a sanctuary or a stage or a membership tier. He set the bar startlingly low:

Where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them.

MATTHEW 18:20, NLT

Two or three. A handful. A few people more than a building. That can be a home. And it does not have to look like church at all, at least not at first. It can be a kitchen table. One friend who prays. A long walk where the conversation finally turns honest. If your body still locks up at the door of a sanctuary, start where your body can go. He said *among them*, not *in the building*. And it matters that you let it be one, because a faith rebuilt entirely alone slowly becomes a smaller, more private version of the very individualism the machine was selling you all along. The others are not a reward waiting at the end of the path once you have healed enough to deserve them. They are part of how the healing happens. They are the soil. You grow in them.



The Questions to Ask

So how do you find such a place without falling straight back into the thing you escaped? Not, I would gently say, by shopping for a label. The instinct is to go looking for the right *kind* of church — a progressive one, a different-flavored one, some camp with the correct opinions — but that road leads right back into factions, and factions are what besieged you. A label tells you almost nothing about whether a room will let you breathe.

So carry questions instead. Not someone else's checklist — your own, drawn from your own wounds. Each thing that wore you down becomes a thing you are allowed to ask before you trust a room again. You do not need a credential to do this. You need only the honesty to notice your own breathing.

- When I ask a hard question, do they meet me as a person who thinks — or handle me as a problem to manage?
- Is there room to be tired here, or does faithfulness somehow mean every hour of my life filled?
- Do they see *me*, or do they see what I can do for them?
- When my heart turns toward the poor, the outcast, the stranger, do they call that the gospel — or call it “*too political*”?
- Am I safe here? And would the people on the margins say the same?
- Does this place seem to need an enemy in order to feel like itself?
- Can I disagree and still belong — or is belonging only ever for those who already agree?

- How do they speak about the people who left? Because that is how they will one day speak about me.
- When money comes up, does it sound like worship, or like a bill arriving?
- When I leave their company, do I feel lighter, or heavier?

Notice what is *not* on that list. Not “*do they agree with me about everything.*” A room where everyone already thinks exactly as you do is not a home — it is just a faction tailored to your preferences, and it will turn on you the first day you change your mind. A tribe that does not besiege you is not one that matches you. It is one where you can be fully present, fully honest, and fully tired, and still belong. That kind of place is rarer than it should be. It may be small. It may take a while to find. And you are allowed to go slowly — to visit without joining, to sit near the door, to leave the moment your body says leave. A room worth trusting will not rush you, because rushing is a sales tactic, and homes do not have sales tactics. Keep the questions in your pocket and keep walking. You will know the room when you can finally exhale in it.



A Word as You Go

So let me gather it into a few plain things, and then I will let you go in peace.

Home is Christ. That was true the whole time, even on the nights you were most certain you had lost everything. You were never as homeless as you feared, because the One you kept whispering to in the dark never once left the room. And home is also, in time, a people — a body, a few, a place where you

can be planted and grow. Not a recruitment. Not a building you owe your weekends to. A home.

If you need company while you look for that — somewhere quiet to catch your breath, a place to write the prayers that do not fit anywhere else — there is room here, and it asks nothing of you. But I would be just as glad if you closed this and found your two or three somewhere I will never hear about. The destination was never us. It was always Him.

And before you go, notice one last thing. No one shoved you down this road. Through all of it — the leaving, the bare ground, the long quiet — something kept drawing you forward. Something kept you praying when you had every reason on earth to stop. He told us, long ago, exactly how he works:

And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.

JOHN 12:32, NLT

Draw. Never drive. Never shove. That steady pull you have felt under everything was not the machinery, and it was not your own willpower, which gave out long ago. It was Him — lifting himself into view and trusting his own beauty to bring you the rest of the way.

You do not have to have arrived. You only have to be facing the light.

Things grow toward it on their own.

FAITH OVER FACTIONS — A PLACE FOR THE SPIRITUALLY HOMELESS

If you'd like company on the path, you'll find us at faithoverfactions.com — including the Faith Journal, a quiet, private place to write honestly, with no metrics, no comment threads, and no one telling you what your doubt means.

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