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*The Christian Atheist*

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# A Letter to the Reader

SITTING NEXT TO TOTAL STRANGERS ON AIRPLANES PROVIDES limitless entertainment and surprises — especially if you're a pastor, like I am.

Before some unsuspecting traveler finds out what I do for a living, our exchanges are usually effortless and fun. But as soon as they uncover my profession, the conversation takes a turn. Sometimes our discussion becomes more meaningful, drawing on a common spiritual bond. Other times it grows heated, as the person unloads their doubts, confusion, or spiritual hurts. Sometimes plugged-in headphones and closed eyes leave no doubt that the talk is over.

On a recent trip, I had two flights before reaching my destination. On my first flight, I sat next to Travis, a middle-aged, married father of two, who was headed home from an unsuccessful business trip. On my next flight, I sat next to Michelle, an exceptionally witty and bright twenty-three-year-

old grad student starting her summer break. Both were tired. Both were anxious to get home.

And both were atheists — though very different kinds.

Travis was the conventional sort. Like most atheists, he denied the existence of God altogether. He didn't pray, didn't read the Bible, didn't attend church. The only thing he liked about Christianity was poking fun at television preachers. He made himself laugh out loud as he affected a thick, syrupy accent: "I don't believe in GAW-duh!"

During the first part of our flight, we discussed Travis's struggling commercial real estate business. Two years ago he was on top of the world, routinely cutting deals in several markets. Now he couldn't negotiate prices at a yard sale. The weakened economy and a smaller income had forced him to make significant lifestyle changes, but Travis expressed quiet hope that things would return to normal soon.

After openly sharing some of his professional challenges, Travis asked me what kind of business I was in. Sticking with business language, I explained that I'm in the spiritual business — the pastor of a church.

That's when Travis pounced: "So you're a minister?" Doing his best to remain cordial, he asked in an obviously sarcastic tone, "I guess that means you believe in a literal seven-day creation, huh?" Before I could even respond, he began blurting out his rapid anti-Christian barrage. "No disrespect meant, but Christians are the weakest people alive. They use Christianity as a crutch to avoid the real world. And the more vocal they are about their religion, the more hypocritical they are." After

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several minutes of uninterrupted ranting, Travis snapped out of his tirade. Almost as if to offer a truce, he said, “Well, if there is an eternity, I’m sure you’ll be in good shape since you’re a pastor, and I’m guessing I’ll come out as good as most people.”

The rest of our conversation was pleasant. He didn’t change my views about God, and I didn’t change his. We both hoped the economy would improve soon and parted with a friendly farewell.

Michelle, the young grad student I sat next to on my second flight, is an entirely different kind of atheist — a Christian Atheist.

Christian Atheists are everywhere. They attend Catholic churches, Baptist churches, Pentecostal churches, nondenominational churches, and even churches where the pastor says, “GAW-duh!” when he’s preaching. They attend big seminaries, Big Ten universities, and every college in between. They are every age and race and occupation — and some even read their Bibles every day.

Christian Atheists look a lot like Christians, but they live a lot like Travis.

Before our plane took off, Michelle struck up a conversation. Somewhat nervous about flying, she seemed eager to talk, as if our chat might make the flight pass more quickly. After describing her difficulties with balancing her checkbook and handling her divorced parents and her live-in boyfriend — who’s scared to death of marriage — she asked me about my life.

Creating a diversion from my “I’m a pastor” answer, I

explained that I am married and have six children. “Six kids?! Don’t you know what causes kids?” she joked.

After some more small talk, Michelle asked me what I do for a living. No longer able to dodge the inevitable, I answered, “Well, as a matter of fact, I’m the pastor of a church.”

This revelation gave Michelle permission to unleash a stream of Christian words and stories. Dropping the occasional “God told me” and “God is good,” she smiled softly as she described how she “gave her life to Jesus” at the age of fifteen at a Christian youth camp. After praying sincerely, she was eager to get back to school to share her faith and live a life of purity and spiritual integrity. Michelle held on to her new belief in God but soon slipped back into her old way of life.

As if in a confessional, Michelle continued pouring out her life’s darker details. She looked down as she admitted that she was doing things with her live-in boyfriend that she knew she shouldn’t. She told me she wanted to go to church but was simply too busy working and studying. She did pray many nights — mostly that her boyfriend would become a Christian like she was. “If only he believed in Jesus, then he might want to marry me,” she said, wiping her tears.

At last, Michelle expressed one final confession: “I know my life doesn’t look like a Christian’s life should look, but I *do* believe in God.”

Welcome to Christian Atheism, where people believe in God but live as if he doesn’t exist. As much as I don’t want to admit it, I see this kind of atheism in myself. People might assume that a pastor wouldn’t struggle with any form

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of atheism, but I certainly do. Sadly, Christian Atheism is everywhere. There has to be a better way to live.

This book is for anyone courageous enough to admit to their hypocrisy. I hope it pushes you, challenges you, and disturbs you. And if you're honest before God — as I am trying to be — perhaps together we can shed some of our hypocrisy and live a life that truly brings glory to Christ.

## INTRODUCTION

# A Recovering Christian Atheist

HI, MY NAME IS CRAIG GROESCHEL, AND I'M A CHRISTIAN ATHEIST.

For as long as I can remember, I've believed in God, but I haven't always lived like he exists. Today my Christian Atheism isn't as large of a problem as it once was, but I still struggle with it. Like a recovering alcoholic careful never to take sobriety for granted, I have to take life one day at a time.

You might think it's odd for a pastor to struggle with living like there is no God. However, in my corner of the world, Christian Atheism is a fast-spreading spiritual pandemic which can poison, sicken, and even kill eternally. Yet Christian Atheism is extremely difficult to recognize — especially by those who are infected.

My story illustrates the symptoms. I was born into a "Christian" family. We believed in God and attended church when convenient — and always on Christmas or Easter. And

when we did attend, it was always boring. Some older man wearing what looked like a dress would stand at the pulpit for what seemed like forever, talking about stuff that didn't make any sense to me. I remember counting how many times the preacher raised one hand in the air — fifty-three in one sermon may still be the world record.

Even though I never carried a Bible to church, we did own a yellowish-gold Bible that was the size of a small U-haul truck and sat prominently on our living room coffee table. The pictures gave me warm, tingly, spiritual feelings, but the words were an impenetrable web of thees and thous.

Two of my friends' parents always made us pray before meals: "God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for this food." It always bothered me that this prayer didn't rhyme, even though it seemed like it should, and wondered if it bothered God too. At my grandparent's house, we prayed, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let this food to us be blessed."

Neither prayer mattered to me, but at least the second one actually rhymed.

## Hell No

When I was eight, I attended a backyard vacation Bible school. I was a little nervous, but the games, prizes, stories, and unlimited animal crackers with grape-flavored Kool-Aid won me over. The kids seemed normal enough, except for Alex, who wet his pants twice in one day. (Alex, if you're reading this, you owe me big time for leaving out your last name.)

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Turns out it was all a setup for the final day, when the teachers brought the spiritual heat. Like Nolan Ryan's ninety-five-mile-an-hour fastball, they brushed me back from the plate.

"Close your eyes. Bow your heads," said Grownup 1, her tone deadly serious. "I don't want anyone looking around."

She paused dramatically. "If you were to die tonight, do you know for certain that you'd spend eternity in heaven? If you're not sure, please raise your hand."

Still buzzing from dozens of animal crackers, and certainly not certain about my eternal destiny, I raised my right hand.

Suddenly Grownup 2 joined Grownup 1, and they picked me up underneath both arms and carried me to the back of the garage. One escape route was blocked by the garage itself, another was blocked by a chain-link fence, and the grownups' glares completed the triangle.

I was trapped and completely unprepared for what came next.

"If you don't know for sure where you'll spend eternity, then if you die, you'll go to hell."

Hell! Hell? At that moment, hell seemed like the safer option. Looking back, I'm certain these caring adults had nothing but pure intentions, but at the time they scared the animal crackers out of me. Taking my cue from the Little Rascals, I crouched down and darted between Grownup 2's legs, then sprinted faster than Forrest Gump all the way home. Still terrified of that nasty devil and the sulfuric fire he had reserved for kids like me, I barricaded myself in my closet and cried out to God, "Please don't send me to hell!"

Unquestionably, I believed in God. I was certain there was a heaven — although I didn't want to go there anytime soon — and a hell. I'd accidentally burned myself with matches before, so any place filled with fire, smoke, and sulfur was a place I never wanted to go. For years I prayed at night, "God, please don't send me to hell." I'd repeat those words over and over, until finally I could drift off into sleep.

In the morning, occasionally I'd awaken and realize that I'd neglected to sign off to the Judge of my eternal destination — no "amen," no "over and out," no "10-4, good buddy." I'd left God hanging. I didn't know all ten commandments, but I was pretty sure proper prayer protocol had to be one of them. Afraid that I was a sinner in the hands of an angry God, I'd pray, "Amen. Amen. Amen." Sometimes I'd even multiply them: "Amen times amen times amen times amen."

By the time I entered middle school, I had about forty-seven jillion amens stored up, along with a growing case of spiritual fear and insecurity.

## High School Hypocrisy

When I was sixteen, I decided one Sunday morning to go to church by myself. (Okay, perhaps part of it was that I had just gotten my driver's license and gladly drove anywhere — but I sincerely did feel drawn to church.) Pondering what it means to be "right with God," I strolled up the church stairs and sat in the third pew.

## A Recovering Christian Atheist

Cue another sermon that spoke right past me.

I headed out, disappointed. The pastor had strategically positioned himself at the main exit, shaking people's hands as they left. Seizing my opportunity, I asked him if I could make an appointment to talk to him about God.

That Wednesday after school, I found myself sitting in the pastor's study, which I quickly realized was also the scariest place on earth. I wondered if he could hear my voice trembling as I asked, "How do I know if I've been good enough to get to heaven?"

Although I don't recall everything the pastor said, I remember advice about not being a hell-raiser, not chasing girls, and not drinking beer — in other words, all bad news. All my friends were beer-guzzling, girl-chasing hell-raisers, and while I wasn't their general, I was certainly a lieutenant with legitimate promotion potential.

I left his office determined to stop sinning. It was time to find religion and get myself right with God once and for all. Armed with a new calling, I attacked my next week at school with a spiritual fire for good living.

Then Friday night rolled around.

It wasn't until years later that I discovered Paul's words in Romans 7. He said that the things he wanted to do, he didn't do. And the things he didn't want to do, he did. His story was my story. I wanted to live righteously, but I couldn't seem to get it right for more than five minutes. I believed in God, but I still cheated in school, drank the cheapest beer available, lied about

what I did with my girlfriends, and hoped to find the occasional misplaced *Playboy*.

“God, please don’t send me to hell. Amen times amen.”

## My First Great Awakening

When I was a junior in high school, my church youth group voted me to be their president. Apparently the qualifications for office had nothing to do with living like a Christian, and before I knew it, my one-year term “earned” me a partial scholarship to a Christian university. With athletics covering the rest of my room and board, I embarked on what I hoped would become a new, God-pleasing beginning.

I set off with a carload of clothes, Bic pens, my Cindy Crawford poster, and lofty dreams. Instead of being surrounded by young Billy Grahams and Mother Teresas, however, I was bombarded by miniature Lindsay Lohans and Kanye Wests and quickly pulled into the party scene.

Sin is fun — at least for a while. But it never fails to come back to haunt you, usually when you least expect it. Like a sneeze, sin feels good at first, but it leaves a huge mess. By my sophomore year, several of my fraternity brothers got busted for grand larceny, putting our whole fraternity at risk of being kicked off campus. Around the same time, because of a major hangover, I slept through tennis practice, which placed me exactly one mistake away from losing my athletic scholarship. And many people on campus despised me because of how I had treated a few girls.

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Feeling lower and lower by the second, I decided to look up toward God — again.

I decided to start a Bible study in our fraternity house. I sold this unusual idea to my frat brothers by explaining that it would be great PR to help our sullied reputation. Truthfully, I wanted to learn about God. Since church hadn't really helped me in that department, I thought I might as well go straight to the Bible to see what I could discover for myself.

On the Tuesday morning before our first Bible study, I was strolling across campus between classes when it dawned on me that I didn't have a Bible. (I left the family's gold Bible at home.) On my way to my world literature class, an older gentleman introduced himself to me, saying he was a Gideon. He asked me if I wanted a free Bible. I wasn't sure what a Gideon was, but as far as I was concerned, he might as well have been one of God's angels.

That night, a handful of us started reading the Bible in a small, sweat-soaked, party-stained room in the Lambda Chi Alpha house. We started reading in Matthew, chapter one, and once we moved past who begat whom, the pace picked up. At the end of our rookie Bible studies, we prayed the only prayers we knew: "God, protect us as we party. God, keep Joe's girlfriend from getting pregnant. God, don't let us get caught cheating on the American history test." They weren't the typical prayers prayed at Baptist student unions, but they were honest.

We were a bunch of guys who believed in God but didn't have a clue who God really is.

Although we didn't know what we were doing, our little

Bible study started to grow. Apparently many of our party friends bore a similar spiritual curiosity. The more Bible we read and the more prayers we prayed, the more people showed up and the more God seemed to do.

After finishing Matthew, we discovered that Mark, Luke, and John had several of the same stories. Three chapters into Acts, we got bored and skipped to Romans. Midway through Romans, I got so excited that I started reading ahead. When I reached Ephesians, I encountered two verses that would forever change my life: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.” Could this be true? We’re saved by God’s grace and his grace alone? It’s not by our works? Why didn’t anyone tell me?

I felt like a caged animal and had to escape that tiny room. Someone was sitting in front of the only door, so I slipped out the closest window and dropped to the ground. Sensing something important, I dashed to a nearby softball field, needing to be alone with God. What happened next is hard to explain and even harder for me to believe. The presence of God became real to me.

I always thought that only wackos actually hear from God. Sure, you heard God. And there’s a teeny angel on your shoulder right now telling you what to do next, right?

Well, that evening I became a wacko. Kneeling on the grass, I heard a voice. It wasn’t audible — it was actually way too loud to be audible, too present inside me. “Without me, you have

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nothing. With me, you have everything.” I knelt and prayed the shortest, most power-packed, faith-filled prayer of my life.

Not so much whispering as mouthing the words, I said to God, “Take my life.”

That was it. I had knelt down in the field as one person, and I stood up as a completely different person. I had the same body, the same voice, and the same mind, but I wasn’t the same. I’d later learn that I’d become what the Bible calls a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). The old was gone; the new had come. I had finally transformed from a Christian Atheist into a Christian.

For the first time in my life, I believed in God and began to live like he is real.

## Mission Not Accomplished

Since I was a new person, I became aware of a new mission: to spread the gospel into all the earth — starting with my roommate. No one was immune from my infectious faith. Not my fellow athletes, not my fraternity brothers, not my party friends, not my professors. To say I became a fanatic would be an understatement. I started collecting converts to Christianity like Michael Phelps collects gold medals. The more that God did, the more I began to understand that God was calling me to give him my whole life in full-time, vocational ministry.

As if on cue, when I was twenty-three, God opened a door for me to work at a historic downtown church. My dream-come-true slowly turned into a spiritual nightmare. What

started out as a good thing quickly became an obsession. My service was never enough. And as my love for ministry burned hotter, my passion for Christ cooled.

My mission had become a job. Instead of studying God's Word out of personal devotion, I studied only to preach. Instead of preaching messages to bring glory to God, I preached to bring people to church. I promised hurting people I would pray for them, but I usually didn't follow through.

At the age of twenty-five, I was a full-time pastor and a part-time follower of Christ.

## An Invitation

Does any of this resonate with your experience? Was there a time in your life that you were closer to God than you are today? If you're like me, your spiritual drift didn't happen on purpose. Like a tiny leak in a tire, slowly but surely, your spiritual passion quietly slipped away. Maybe it has just become clear to you. Instead of a fully devoted follower of Christ, you've unintentionally become a full-time mom or full-time student or a full-time bank clerk — and a part-time follower of Christ.

Maybe like so many, you're a member of a church, but you're secretly still ashamed of your past. Perhaps you've heard about the love of God, but you're still not convinced that God totally loves you. Or though you're convinced God exists, your prayer life isn't what you know it should be. Perhaps like many other well-meaning Christians, you know what God wants you to do, but you still do whatever you want. Or you genuinely want to

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trust God as your provider, but you find it so hard to actually do. Possibly you believe in heaven and hell, but sharing your faith with others is still foreign or simply way too intimidating for you. Or you may believe in God but don't see much need for the church.

I'll be honest with you about my struggles, and I hope you'll be honest as well. And together, with God's help, perhaps we can learn to know and walk with God more intimately.

CHAPTER 1

When You  
Believe in God  
but Don't Really  
Know Him



“CRAIG, YOU OUGHT TO MEET THIS GIRL. SHE’S WEIRD LIKE you. I mean, she’s a God fanatic. She’s, like, way overboard for God.”

“Weird like you” wasn’t in my top-ten qualities to look for in a girl, but enough people were telling me about Amy that I had to meet her. I was a senior in college and praying daily to meet someone equally passionate about Christ. From all reports, Amy was everything I had dreamed of and more.

Our relationship began with several phone calls before we finally met in person. Someone told Amy I resembled Tom Cruise. When she opened the door and saw me for the first time, her expectant smile faltered. I guess I don’t look exactly like Maverick from *Top Gun*. (But I do have dark hair and a big nose.)

That night we attended a Bible study that Amy led for high-

school girls. She was amazing, and all of the love cliches I had heard about over the years happened to me. When she prayed for “her girls,” heaven seemed to open. When she sang songs of worship, time stood still. Every time she looked in my direction, I simultaneously praised God and melted. She was funny, loyal, and sincere. Not to mention, on a scale of one to ten, she was a 498 million. (Still is.) I remember thinking, *God, you are good. Nice work.*

Overflowing with anticipation, I was constantly trying to make a good impression, to present my best Craig. I wore my newest shirts, put on extra cologne, cleaned out my car, and created the perfect mix tape (packed with the latest combination of Christian music and 1980s love songs). But more than that, I tried to make sure I was spiritually on my best game, praying constantly to treat her with honor and purity.

Six months after I first met Amy, I proposed to her at church in front of all our loved ones. (Thankfully she said yes; otherwise, it would have been awkward.) Five months later we got married.

That was nineteen years ago, and our marriage is now officially old enough to move out and go to college. During all those years, I’ve come to know Amy better than I know any other person in the world. If there are forty women in a room all talking at once, I can pick out her voice. If I walk into a crowded lobby, with people all crushed together, my eyes find hers instantly. I know her scent, and a single whiff of it will make me think about her for the rest of the day. I know her

## When You Believe in God but Don't Really Know Him

favorite color, her favorite song, her favorite meal, which of my shirts she likes best.

Despite how completely we know each other — even after nearly two decades — our intimacy continues to grow. We're constantly learning how to connect and communicate deeply. I can practically read her mind. A situation will arise when she's not there, and I know exactly what Amy would do. I know her values. I know how she processes decisions.

The two of us share a history — stories, experiences, and lots of kids. We love each other. We believe in each other.

In short, we know each other.

## Believing versus Knowing

A recent Gallup poll reported that 94 percent of Americans claim to believe in God or a universal spirit. However, a quick glance at Scripture and our culture makes it plainly obvious that nowhere near 94 percent actually know God. I mean, really *know* him — intimately. Belief isn't the same as personal knowledge. For many people, the very idea that you could know God on a relational level seems unlikely, unrealistic, unattainable.

Part of the confusion stems from failure to recognize the different levels of intimacy when it comes to knowing God.

Some of us know God by reputation, as when we hear about a certain girl or guy from a close friend. We may know a bit about God — perhaps we've been to church a few times, we've

heard some Bible stories, or we have a favorite Bible verse on a refrigerator magnet. But it's only secondhand.

Some of us know God in our memories. We've truly experienced his goodness, grace, and love in the past. Like when I recently bumped into an old college buddy. Twenty years ago, we were inseparable. We took classes together, played sports together, and met Christ together. After we graduated, we lost touch. I knew him years ago, but I can't say that I know him now.

And some of us know God intimately. Right here, right now.

This is the kind of loving knowledge that God promises when we seek him (see Deut. 4:29; Jer. 29:13; Matt. 7:7 – 8; Acts 17:27). When we are thirsty for God, God will satisfy that longing. And as we continue to seek God, we'll grow to know him more and more intimately. When we hear God's voice, we'll recognize it instantly. We'll talk to God all the time and miss him when circumstances distract us from his presence. We'll build a history together, storing up story after story of shared experiences.

We'll love God. We'll trust God.

We'll know God.

## Not Knowing God

Maybe you're thinking, *I believe in God. Isn't that enough? I mean, a lot of people don't believe in God, but I do. Isn't that what he wants from me?* Those are fair questions. But believing in God isn't all he wants from us. The book of James says that

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even the demons believe in God, and yet they tremble because they know that they're relationally separated from him (James 2:19). Obviously, there is more to the whole Christian thing than just believing in God.

Growing up, my family was what I'd call "cultural Christians." We'd go to church on Christmas and Easter. We'd help a neighbor in need. We'd donate canned goods to food drives. We'd pray at Thanksgiving meals. But that was basically the extent of it. Even though I believed in God, all I knew was *about* him — and very little of that. I didn't *know* him. And because I didn't know him the way best friends or spouses know each other, I lived according to my own rules.

My very actions revealed my lack of intimate knowledge of God. According to 1 John 2:3–4, "We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him." A little harsh? I prefer to think of it as straightforward and honest. Truthfully spoken by someone who truly cares and wants what's best for us.

We need to keep in mind that God's commands are loving. What God asks his children to do — like pursue justice, love mercy, live humbly (see Mic. 6:8) — is what we want to do anyway, at least in our best moments. We are created to be living examples of God's love to a hurting world.

God cares about how we live. And a relationship with God naturally will flow out in daily attitudes and actions. So if you *look* good, you *are* good, right? Well, maybe not. Knowing God can lead to a positive lifestyle, but the reverse isn't true. Our

outward actions alone don't prove that we enjoy an inward relationship with God. Just because we *do* good doesn't mean we know the One who *is* good. Like when I first met Amy, I didn't know her at first, but I was trying to get to know her. If I didn't make any effort, we'd never really know each other. We need to make an effort to get to know God.

God is interested not only in our actions but also in our hearts — in particular, our attitude toward him. Do our good works overflow from knowing him? Or do we live as though God is simply watching and checking our accomplishments off some heavenly to-do list? Did you get a star for going to church? Being nice? Giving money to charity? Some of us try to earn God's acceptance without truly knowing his heart. And after life is over, Jesus will say to such individuals, "You wanted no part of a relationship with me. Go away." (See Matt. 7:21 – 23.)

Countless well-intentioned people believe in God but don't know him personally. Many of us look the part. Or we think we're Christians because, you know, it's not like we're Buddhists.

We believe in God, but our lives don't reflect who he really is.

## Not Knowing God Well

Have you ever heard of George Brett, the legendary third baseman who played for the Kansas City Royals? When I was a kid, I collected every George Brett baseball card ever made and knew everything about his career.

In 1988, I played in the NAIA National Tennis

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Championship in Kansas City. On a walk downtown, I saw George Brett sitting at an outdoor cafe. I couldn't stop myself—I walked right up to him, extended my hand, and said, "I know this happens to you all the time. I'm so sorry. I just had to tell you, you're the man! In 1980, you batted .390—you almost batted over .400—which would have broken Ted Williams' record from back in 1941. You had 118 RBIs in only 117 games. You're the man!" (A bit repetitive, I know, but I was nervous.)

Now, I didn't actually know George Brett, but I knew information about him. And I had heard that he was cocky and rude. What I experienced, however, was quite the opposite.

"You know all that about me?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm just getting started."

"That's amazing. Why don't you sit with us? Let's talk for a few minutes." And he pulled up a chair.

After we had talked for about fifteen minutes, George asked, "So, what brings you to Kansas City?" I told him that I was playing in the big tennis tournament the next day. He congratulated me and said, "You know what? You've watched me all these years. I'll try to come out and watch you play tomorrow."

The next day, I won the National Tennis title ... with George Brett cheering me on from the very front row. (Cue dream scene fade-out and ethereal musical sounds.)

Okay, so that didn't really happen, though it would have been a great ending to this story. The reality is that George didn't show, and I lost in the second round and went home crushed.

Technically, I could say that I know George Brett because of

our single encounter. But it's obvious I don't really know him. If you were to remind him about our encounter in Kansas City, he might not remember at all.

Now let's rewind the history tape a couple thousand years. When the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians (Jesus-followers who lived in the region of Galatia, modern-day Turkey), they had experienced the real, living God but had recently become trapped in legalism. They knew God, but not well enough to avoid getting sucked back into a life based in the law, rather than in love. In Galatians 4:8–9, Paul wrote, “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?”

Paul essentially was saying, “You know God, but not well enough to avoid your old habits—the attitudes that hurt you and your closeness to God.” In the twenty-first century, we would be wise to ask ourselves, “Is this us too?”

Maybe we “sort of” know God. Maybe sometime in the past we've prayed and asked Jesus to transform our lives. Maybe we have a basic understanding of God. Maybe, once, we genuinely felt close to him. But we don't know him well now.

## Knowing God Intimately

Finally, there are those people who know God intimately and serve him with their whole hearts. For me, I know this is

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happening when I'm becoming increasingly aware of God's presence within me, his provision, his power, and his peace. I don't feel like God's "out there," waiting for me to direct a prayer his way every now and then. It's more like an ongoing conversation: "Hi, God. Hey listen, what do you think of this?" Then I honestly believe God speaks to me through his written Word and by his Spirit.

It's like somehow my spirit is connected to him, and I can hear what he's saying. There's kind of a buzz, a constant conscious awareness that as my day unfolds, God is orchestrating things and sending people into my life. That's doing life with God.

At other times, God may not *feel* as close. But by faith, I know he is with me. No matter what I feel, I hold the assurance that God never leaves me. And he won't leave you.

The psalmist David describes in Psalm 63:1 – 4 his relationship with God. In fact, he says that his experience of knowing the personal God creates a deeper longing for *even more* intimate knowledge of God. Verse 1 begins, "O God, you are my God." You're not somebody else's God, that I've just heard about. You're *my* God.

David continues, "Earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water." In this world, there's nothing that satisfies me. I'm hungry, I eat, and then later I'll be hungry again. Only God can totally satisfy. *I love you so much, God, that I ache for you. I need more of you.*

Have you ever felt that kind of love for someone? When

you're apart, you can't wait to be with them again. When I'm away from Amy, I can't wait to hear her voice again. Imagine that with God.

The psalmist continues, "I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory." I've seen you. I know you. I recognize you on sight. I know what you're like. Your unbounded might and majesty, the sunburst of your splendor, your beauty — these are greater than anything I could ever imagine or describe.

Verse 3 says, "Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you." Better than *life*? He's saying, If I had the choice — either keep God's love and see my mortal body die, or lose his love and live — I would choose to die.

Next verse: "I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands." I'll never be the same. I'm so transformed, so overwhelmed by you, I'm unashamed to do anything to express myself to you. I can't keep my hands at my sides. I'm going to reach them out toward you. I'm going to smile. I'm going to throw my head back and bask in your magnificent glory.

## It's All in the Name

Most Bible historians agree that David also wrote Psalm 9:10, which says in reference to God, "Those who know your name will trust in you." What do *you* call God? The way you address him or refer to him just might reveal the depth of your intimacy. Or lack of it.

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Let me illustrate. What you call me clearly reveals how well you know me — or whether you know me at all. My phone rings. I answer. You're on the other end, and you say, "Good afternoon, Mr. Gress-shuhl. I'd like to talk to you about your phone service."

I can tell one thing right away: You don't know me. You don't even know how to pronounce my name!

Or my wife and I are in a restaurant, and I give the hostess my name while we're waiting for a table. After a few minutes, the hostess calls out, "Grow-SHELL, party of two!" The hostess knows my name and how to pronounce it. But we've just met. We don't know each other.

If you call me "Pastor Craig," chances are you might know a little about me. You know what I do, maybe you've heard me speak, and maybe you're familiar with some of my favorite topics and my up-front personality. But your use of my title doesn't mean that you know me personally.

You might just call me "Craig," and I'd usually assume that you know me even better. My friends call me Craig. We're close.

But if you call me "Groesch," that means we've been friends for a long time. It means we've got stories. (And you've promised not to tell them.) "Groesch" dates us back at least twenty years.

Then there are those who possess exclusive rights to a few specialized, far more intimate forms of address. These are the six beautiful, small people, very dear to me, whom I allow to climb up in my lap. They rub their hands on my face and say things like "You need to shave" and "You're the best" and "Can

I have some candy?” They call me “Daddy.” They know me so much better than even those who call me “Groesch.” The name reveals the intimacy.

What do you call God? The Big Guy in the Sky? The Man Upstairs? Dear eight-pound, six-ounce Baby Jesus? Then you don’t know him. Those titles may be clever or funny, but they certainly aren’t intimate.

If you know God, you are likely to be far more specific with him, and the words you use will reflect your accurate understanding of him. Maybe God graciously forgave you for two decades of sins and you gratefully call him “Savior.” Perhaps when you pray, you call God “Healer” because he’s healed your broken heart. Maybe you call him “Comforter” because he has come alongside and provided company in your misery. Maybe you call him “Fortress” or “Rock” or “Strength.” Maybe you’ve found yourself backed into a corner, with nowhere to turn, creditors calling, and he’s “Provider” to you. If you’re a woman, and the man in your life abandoned you, you might even call him “Husband.” When you feel totally alone, perhaps you call him “Friend.” Maybe your earthly father has never been there for you, and to you God is “Father.”

What do you call God? Your answer may be a clue to how well you know him. Or don’t.

## The Best Is Ahead

It’s time to be honest with yourself and with God: Do you know him? If so, how well?

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If you've acknowledged honestly that you don't know God, I can relate. For too long, I believed in God but didn't know him. Now I do. And knowing him consumes me. Knowing him makes every moment count.

Has God transformed you? Are you different because of him? If not, perhaps you're a Christian Atheist. God loves you and earnestly wants to reveal himself to you. Sadly, our sin separates us from a holy God. In his mercy and grace, God sent his Son, Jesus, to become the perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus, the sinless Son of God, became sin for us on the cross. He is the "lamb of God" who died in our place. Romans 10:13 says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." "Everyone" includes you and me.

If you don't know him, you can. If you used to be close, you can be close again. Getting to know God is not difficult, and it isn't about a bunch of rules. Yes, God wants your obedience, but he wants your heart even more. He says over and over again that if you seek him, you will find him (Deut. 4:29; Jer. 29:13; Matt. 7:7 – 8; Acts 17:27). You can find him by reading your Bible; he's been there all along. And when you begin to seek him, you'll find that he's already running toward you, his beloved child. Get to know him and allow his presence to impact every area of your life, every day.

As you get to know him better, you will change. A vibrant and intimate relationship with God will empower you to heal from the hurts from your past, forgive what seems unforgivable, and change what seems unchangeable about yourself. Walking with God will break the power of materialism in your life

and lead you to a radically generous life. Instead of living for yourself and for the moment, you'll live for Christ and for eternity. Your heart will begin to break for the reasons and causes that break God's heart. You'll serve him faithfully as part of his bride, the church. Instead of living in torment from worry and fear, you'll learn to experience peace, grace, and trust. As you get to know him, you'll live boldly for him, excitedly sharing your faith with others, less and less concerned about what others think. Knowing him will make you ache to tell others about him.

Get to know God. When you do, you will never be the same.