

Chapter Two

Left Behind

My church-induced neuroses started manifesting themselves at a very young age. The paranoia came first.

I chugged the evangelical Kool-Aid at the age of five when I “accepted Christ” at a Vacation Bible School (is it just me, or does “Vacation Bible School” sound like an oxymoron?). The choice I was offered was pretty clear. Either I ask Jesus into my heart and go to heaven, or I don’t and I go to hell. Heaven, from what I could understand, was a wonderful place with lots of toys and desserts and shiny things, where nothing bad ever happens and nobody ever gets in trouble. Hell, on the other hand, was bad. Really bad. People screaming and crying and getting burned in a fire...a fire that never ends.

I was no dummy. I chose heaven.

I had heard a lot about heaven and hell and Jesus even before the Vacation Bible School. I attended Sunday School every Sunday morning, and along with my brothers and sister I was brought to our church’s Sunday night and Wednesday night services as well. I had already heard dozens if not hundreds of Bible stories before I’d even begun kindergarten. There were the good guys like Moses and Noah and Samson, and then there were the stupid guys like Jonah who disobeyed God, and just look what happened to him. God did not mess around. Either you do what God tells you to do, or you end up getting eaten by a fish.

In addition to the Bible stories, the paranoia was further brought on by some of the songs we sang in Sunday School. There were the militant, us-against-the-world songs, like *Onward Christian Soldiers* and *I’m in the Lord’s Army*, that taught us that our faith was supposed to be like fighting a war, with the rest of the world as our enemy. Then there were the more subtle songs, the ones that seemed cheerful and childlike and innocent on the surface, but had underlying themes of judgment and condemnation.

*Be careful little hands what you do,
Be careful little hands what you do,
For the Father up above is looking down in love,
So be careful little hands what you do.*

Be careful little eyes what you see,

*Be careful little eyes what you see,
For the Father up above is looking down in love,
So be careful little eyes what you see.*

*Be careful little minds what you think,
Be careful little minds what you think,
For the Father up above is looking down in love,
So be careful little minds what you think.*

I learned at a very early age that the Christian life was not to be taken lightly. God was watching us all the time, and if we weren't careful, God would have us thrown into the sea and swallowed by a fish.

As best I could tell it was all Eve's fault. If Eve hadn't disobeyed God, then none of us would be sinners, and life would be perfect. The world would be a paradise with millions of naked people walking around plucking pears and bananas off of trees whenever we felt like it, and nobody would be embarrassed about being naked. Both Adam and Eve ruined everything for the rest of us. Why'd they have to do it? Was it so hard to not eat the one fruit God asked them not to eat? How stupid could you be?

While I was pretty scared by the thought of getting swallowed by a fish if I disobeyed God, there was something else that put the fear of Jesus in me even more: The Rapture. The way it worked had been clearly explained to me in Sunday School on numerous occasions, so even at such a young age I think I had a pretty good understanding of conservative evangelical eschatology. This is how it worked: Jesus would come back someday, and all the people who loved him and had asked him into their hearts to be their personal Lord and Savior would be taken with him into the sky and up to heaven. Those who hadn't invited Jesus into their hearts would be left behind in a world of war and famine and evil and torture.

Little did I know at the time that the rapture would be happening so soon, and that it would remain the most vivid memory I would have of my childhood for the rest of my life.

In Monroe, Wisconsin, the town I lived in from kindergarten until halfway through second grade, the elementary school was just a few blocks from our house. Because the small-town Midwest was still pretty Leave-It-to-Beaver-esque in 1968 compared to what it is these days, my parents let me walk to school every day with Carrie Studer, a classmate who lived in the house across the street from us. One day, Carrie and I took a little too long getting to school, and we arrived quite a few minutes late. We entered the school and walked to our classroom, but the school was strangely deserted. All of the kids' jackets

were hanging on the coat racks in the hall, but the classrooms were empty. All of them. Coats and lunch boxes, but no bodies. Where could everyone be?

Suddenly, I realized what had happened. Jesus had come like a thief in the night, and we'd been left behind.

Carrie hadn't heard of the rapture, but as soon as I explained it to her, she was nearly as freaked out about it as I was.

My survival instincts took over. "We've got to go home!" I told Carrie.

We ran all the way back to my house, crying all the way; me freaking out that I had blown it somehow and was going to be the only member of my family that didn't get raptured with Jesus. What had I done wrong? Was it the lie that I had told my mom the day before when I said that I hadn't been the one who left a turd in the toilet without flushing, but really I had?

We made it home in record time and burst into our house. I made a quick run-through to look for any signs of life, and came upon my mom doing some work in the kitchen. I ran up to her and hugged her more tightly than I ever had, sobbing and out of breath. Carrie looked on, tears in her eyes but significantly more in control of her emotions than I was.

"What are you kids doing here?" Mom asked, surprised and curious. "Why aren't you at school?"

I glanced at Carrie with that look: Do I tell her?

"We got to school and all the coats were hanging on the coat racks and all the kids' lunch boxes were on the shelf but the school was empty," I explained hurriedly and with great conviction that I knew what I was talking about.

"Every single classroom was *empty*. Jesus came back and didn't take us with him!"

Mom smiled, trying her best not to laugh outright. "Oh, honey. Jesus didn't come back. There must be some other explanation."

"No, he *did*," I argued, looking at Carrie for back-up. "I think he took all of the teachers and the kids, but he didn't take us." By this time Carrie was nodding in agreement.

"Oh, Tom," Mom said, her voice full of warmth and assurance, "Jesus didn't come back." Then, as proof that this was fact she said, "I'm still here, aren't I?"

I scowled. I hadn't thought about that. If anyone knew Jesus, surely Mom did. There's no way Mom would still be here if Jesus had come back.

Mom convinced us to let her take us back to school, and we climbed into our Dodge Polaris station wagon and headed back. We entered the school, and sure enough, the classrooms were still deserted.

"See, Mom? I told you."

"Let's just keep looking," Mom said calmly.

Mom led us through a few more hallways that were also deserted, and we arrived at the school office. A couple of secretaries were busy at their desks, and the principal was in his office.

“Excuse me. Can you tell me where all the kids are?” Mom asked one of the secretaries. “We went to the classroom but there’s no one in it.”

“Oh, the whole school is in the auditorium,” the secretary answered. “Do you know how to get to the auditorium?”

Mom replied that she did and thanked the secretary. We walked to the auditorium together, me holding Mom’s hand the entire way and Carrie trailing a few steps behind. Mom opened the door to the auditorium. The room was dark, and inside were all of the kids. Projected onto the screen was a movie – *Old Yeller*.

We saw some of the kids from our class, and I pointed them out to Mom. She told us to go have a seat with the rest of the kids, and left us in the auditorium. I’d never felt such wonderful relief; it was even better than the relief of finally remembering where I’d left my brother’s walkie-talkies that I’d taken without permission.

I’ve often wondered if Carrie remembers that event, and whether or not it left a mark on her as it did on me. Carrie, if you’re out there, I hope you recovered a little more quickly than I did.

For the rest of my youth, the rapture paranoia was always there in the back of my mind. As I got older and began going to summer camp and attending the national youth conferences our denomination put on, I never missed an opportunity to rededicate my life to Christ. I wasn’t going to take any chances. As hard as I tried, I didn’t always remember to confess my sins after I committed them. This produced in me a constant nagging fear that when Jesus came back for real, there might be some sin that I’d forgotten to confess that would keep me from making the cut.

I *wanted* to be a good Christian; I really did. I knew inside that I really was a sinful person, and I believed what the Bible said about Jesus dying on the cross for our sins. I still believe it today. But in spite of my belief, as a child I was always haunted by the idea that my salvation and God’s love for me were dependent on how well I was doing at not sinning at any given point in time.

I tried my best to live like a Christian was supposed to live, but no matter how hard I tried I kept screwing up. It was exhausting. I’d try to do the right thing, and sometimes I would have a good run of several days of what honestly seemed like sin-free living, but invariably I would screw it up and do something I knew I shouldn’t do. I would then go through days and even weeks of guilt, during which time the amount of screwing up just seemed to grow exponentially. Fortunately, with as much as I attended church, the opportunities

to repent and get right with God were plentiful, and I would eventually get clean again. My sanctified living would last for several days, and then the whole cycle would start over.

What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I get it straight? Everyone else seemed to be doing fine with it, so why wasn't I? Maybe I wasn't even really a Christian. Maybe all those times I'd repented and rededicated my life to Jesus had all had some small degree of insincerity or doubt in them that kept them from really being true and kept me from really being saved. Would I ever be a good Christian, or was I doomed to keep repeating this pattern for the rest of my life? What was going to happen? Would it take God doing something like having me thrown into the sea and swallowed by a whale to get me to finally become obedient once and for all? Or had his patience already run out? Was I doomed to be left behind?
