

A Walk Through Purgatory
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Published by Philip Schaub at Smashwords

FOREWORD

Thank you for purchasing this ebook. Your support allows me to write more.

I am an ordinary pew sitter with no authority to speak for the Roman Catholic Church, but simply hope to share my best understanding of what the church has taught us. To explore further, please join me at JoyfulCatholics.com or contact me at JoyfulCatholics@gmail.com

God Bless,

Phil

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Chapter 1: Court

Lost and confused, Pete stepped out of a bright mist. Where was he? What was happening? He was so bewildered that it took a minute before he realized the pain in his knees was gone. For several years, Pete had worked hard to ignore the pain in his knees. Suddenly there was no pain to ignore! Gingerly, he stepped firmly with one foot, then the other. No pain! Then, ever so gently, he bounced up on his tiptoes. Still no pain! He walked in a small circle, then glided, and then danced around in the smooth swirling motions of a waltz. Still he felt no pain! Growing bold, he did an Irish jig, or at least something vaguely resembling an Irish jig. All of this was without any pain at all!

Stopping to think, Pete realized that he had never felt better in his life! Not only his knees felt great. His breathing was easy. His eyesight was perfect. In fact, all pain and discomfort had ended the moment Pete ... .. died?

Pete thought back over the last hour. Yes. He had died.

"That's not fair!" Pete blurted out loud. "I never got married. I never had children. I never did a lot of things. Why shouldn't I have a full life?"

"Why should you?" asked an amused voice. Expanding his attention beyond himself, Pete noticed an angel watching him and clearly amused by his clumsy attempts at dancing.

"Why not?" retorted Pete, "I'm a good person."

"It's not about being good." replied the angel.

"Well, you know, this is a bad time for me to die. I have a very important meeting next Tuesday ..."

"You will miss that meeting." the angel interrupted with a smile.

"But why?" Pete whined.

"Everyone dies and moves on to the next phase of existence."

"Why now?"

"Because you are invited now to participate in the life of your creator. You decide now whether you accept His invitation."

"I'd definitely prefer to stay alive, thanks. By the way, who are you anyway?"

With a grand bow, the angel replied, "I am Angelo, your guardian angel. I have watched over you every day of your life."

"So I really am ... dead?" Pete watched Angelo nod and then Pete continued, "Uh. It's nice to meet you. I guess. Did you really watch over me my whole life?"

"Yes. And an interesting life it was too!" laughed Angelo in reply. "Now it is time for you to move on to the next phase of your existence."

"Do you know where I'm going to be sent? Was I good enough to get in to Heaven? Come on. You can tell me."

"Well, let's start your journey. Watch and listen. You will learn your judgment soon enough."

Pete had been feeling confident, but the word 'judgment' made him suddenly doubtful. Had he been good enough?

Expanding his attention beyond Angelo, Pete noticed they were in the far back of a courtroom. The bright mist formed the back wall. At the front was a seated judge looking down from behind a high desk. Two angels stood in front of the desk, one at each end. Both were beautiful. Beyond the angels two paths left the courtroom. In one direction Pete saw a straight and narrow path leading away and then up and over a hill. In the opposite direction was a broad, meandering path gently sloping downward until it disappeared into darkness.

Between Pete and the judge was a line of people escorted by their guardian angels. They were waiting to be heard, waiting to be judged. There was that word again. Now Pete was getting nervous.

As they joined the line, Pete asked Angelo, "What happens now?"

Angelo whispered, "You recognize, I am sure, that beyond the angel the straight and narrow path up the hill is the path to Heaven. On the other side, beyond the demon ..."

"What?" Pete interrupted, "That's a demon? I thought those were both angels. I thought demons were ugly with horns and tails."

Angelo chuckled and replied, "You can't tell by looking at someone whether they will help you or hurt you. The differences between angels and demons are all in their minds and hearts and souls.

Anyway, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, " as Angelo said 'rudely interrupted', the two of them exchanged amused smiles like life long friends, "beyond the demon the wide meandering path is the path to Hell. Soon you will be walking one path or the other."

That last bit brought back Pete's nervousness as he turned his attention to the proceedings, hoping for a clue as to which direction he would be told to take.

A woman stepped up before the judge and announced in a strong voice, "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. In His name I ask for admittance to Heaven."

The angel at the start of the straight, narrow path said, "Jesus is waiting for you with open arms. Come and enjoy eternal bliss."

The demon at the start of the wide, meandering path said, "Really? You're not perfect enough for Heaven. You're a backsliding Christian at best. God doesn't want a hypocrite like you."

The judge said, "God has made His judgment of you. God loves you and wants you in Heaven. Now, you announce your personal judgment. Do you choose God or not God?"

The woman said, "I choose Jesus; now and forever!" The judge smiled and gestured toward the angel. The woman ignored the demon and happily gave the angel a hug. Then she and her guardian angel proceeded up the straight and narrow path toward Heaven.

Pete whispered to Angelo, "I thought God decided who goes to Heaven and who goes to Hell."

Smiling, Angelo answered, "We get that a lot. However, remember that God is all about love. In His love, God calls every human being to Himself. Each human being chooses whether to accept God's love. Each human being decides whether to spend eternity with God or not."

Pete objected, "But God never told us that we choose!"

Angelo quickly replied, "Oh yes He did! A lot of people can quote Chapter 3 verse 16 in John's Gospel."

"Yes." interjected Pete and he proudly rattled off, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life."

Angelo chuckled and said, "I knew you would say that! Do you know what the Bible says next?"

"Well, no."

"Read all of John Chapter 3 sometime. John goes on to elaborate that God sent Jesus into the world to save the world, not to condemn it; but some people prefer darkness to light.

"God had your Catholic Bishops put it another way in paragraph # 1033 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It says very clearly that Hell is self-exclusion from God. Look it up sometime.

"Like I said before, each human being individually decides whether to accept the gift of God's love. Like this next gentleman."

Pete turned to see a man step up before the judge and proclaim, "I have followed all the dictates of the Qu'ran. I have lived with FAITH. I have PRAYED daily. I have given generously to ZAKAH. I have FASTED as commanded. I have even made the HAJJ twice. I have submitted to God and followed all the teachings of Mohammed his prophet. Blessings be unto him."

The demon shouted, "Unworthy! You are unworthy. What makes you think you deserve paradise?"

The angel said, "Come receive the unearned gifts God has prepared for you."

The judge said, "God has made His judgment of you. God loves you and wants you in Heaven. Now, you announce your personal judgment. Do you choose God or not God?"

The Muslim smiled and walked proudly past the angel and started down the straight and narrow path to Heaven with his guardian angel following behind.

Next a man stepped before the judge and loudly declared, "I'm not dead. This is just a dream. I'm an atheist. I know you don't exist. This is just my sub-conscious working out some thoughts."

The angel said, "You are making a real choice here. It matters. Make the right choice for your true happiness."

The demon shouted, "Don't be a fool! Come to the land of the rational. Sort out the issues in your mind without interference."

The judge said, "God has made His judgment of you. God loves you and wants you in Heaven. Now, you announce your personal judgment. Do you choose God or not God?"

The atheist paused; looked at the angel and up the straight and narrow path; then turned to study the demon and gaze down the wide, meandering path.

Finally, the atheist turned to the judge and announced loudly, "I am not afraid. I will follow the path of free thinking. I reject the notion of any god controlling my existence. I will go to the land of the rational." With a self satisfied air he strutted past the demon and down the wide, meandering path. His guardian angel turned and, weeping openly, walked slowly back past the line. Angelo gave the despondent guardian angel a hug and watched sadly as the angel disappeared into the bright mist.

"And those that tread the path to Hell are lost forever." said Pete sadly.

Angelo sighed, smiled wanly and replied, "Not necessarily. This man's choice to reject God does not cause God to reject him. God loves every human being and will always, ALWAYS welcome any of His precious children into Heaven. The only ones who end up in Hell are the ones who seriously, permanently choose Hell."

Pete had to think on that one. Meanwhile ...

The next man to step before the judge wore the traditional yarmulke of an Orthodox Jew. He stood tall and half spoke half sang, "Sh'ma Israel ..." It continued on but Pete could not make out what the man was saying. He looked at Angelo quizzically.

Angelo smiled and said, "Your hearing is fine. He is chanting in Hebrew. This prayer is a beautiful reminder that loving God is what life is all about."

The judge smiled happily as the chant rose over the assembly. When the man had finished, the demon glared but was silent. The judge said, "God has made His judgment of you. God loves you and wants you in Heaven. Now, you announce your personal judgment. Do you choose God or not God?"

The man replied, "I choose God with all my heart, with all my soul, and with all my strength." The judge's smile widened even a little more as he gestured toward the angel. The man's guardian angel joined him and they walked up the straight and narrow path toward Heaven.

Next a woman stepped gracefully up before the judge and said, "I call on Lady Saraswati to receive my soul and allow me to merge with her as a drop of rain merges with the sea."

Just then a figure appeared around the end of the desk next to the angel. It looked exactly like the traditional image of Lady Saraswati.

The angel cried, "It's a deception. This is not Lady Saraswati!"

The Saraswati looking figure pointed dramatically at the woman and pronounced, "I reject you. Go the other way to receive your just desserts."

The demon said, "See? See? You have too much bad karma. Come this way."

The angel said, "Please come this way. Meet the one, true, living God."

The judge said, "God has made His judgment of you. God loves you and wants you in Heaven. Now, you announce your personal judgment. Do you choose God or not God?"

The woman bowed and said that she chose the peace and harmony of being with the gods. She then turned her back on the demon and stepped towards the angel. Her guardian angel joined her and the pair giggled like little girls as they walked past the frustrated Saraswati look alike and started on the straight and narrow path to Heaven.

Pete felt himself getting nervous again because now the last person ahead of him in line stepped forward. He was an old, white haired man. He bowed deeply to the judge and said, "Confucius said, 'Where-so-ever you go, go with all your heart.' Unfortunately, I am of a divided heart in this decision."

The demon said, "Come. Join the wise who understand there is no being greater than yourself."

The angel said, "Confucius also said, 'Hold faithfulness and sincerity as first principles.' and 'It does not matter how slowly you go so long as you do not stop.' "

"Ah, true!" cried the old man.

The angel continued, "Come, learn of the wisdom and love of your creator."

The judge said, "God has made His judgment of you. God loves you and wants you in Heaven. Now, you announce your personal judgment. Do you choose God or not God?"

The man bowed again and answered, "As Confucius said, 'When you have faults, do not fear to abandon them.' I will walk in the way of true, eternal wisdom. I choose God." His guardian angel smiled and stepped forward to escort him up the straight and narrow path to Heaven.

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Chapter 2: Personal Judgment

"Here you go." Angelo said, "Now is the time for your personal judgment."

Pete immediately felt a bolt of fear go through him.

"No need to be afraid." said Angelo, "Just be yourself."

Pete stepped forward nervously and addressed the judge, "I am a sinful man, but I choose God and ask for His grace to help me successfully live out the choice I have made."

The demon said, "But you didn't follow all the rules! You skipped Sunday Mass. You haven't confessed all your sins. You are not worthy of Heaven."

Pete turned to the demon, "True. I am not worthy. But then again, no human being is worthy. I depend entirely on the love of God shown in the life of Jesus." Pete turned back to the judge who smiled as he said to Pete, "God has made His judgment of you. God loves you and wants you in Heaven. Now, you announce your personal judgment. Do you choose God or not God?"

Pete sighed in relief, stood tall, and said, "I choose Jesus. Amen" Where did that 'Amen' come from? Angelo smiled as he stepped up and escorted Pete past the angel and onto the straight and narrow path to Heaven. As he looked up the path, Pete noticed for the first time that there was a faint glow coming over the top of the hill.

Angelo was excited and happy as he said, "I knew you'd be fine. Now that you have officially chosen God, your choice is eternal." but his voice betrayed a note of sadness as he added, "You will eventually share in God's life."

"Eventually? Why not right now?" asked Pete.

Angelo carefully answered, "The straight and narrow path takes you through Purgatory and directly to God in Heaven. How long it takes is up to you and the choices that you make. There are no obstacles on the straight and narrow path. There are no delays except the delays you choose. Once you enter Purgatory, you are assured of eventually entering Heaven. All you have to do to get to Heaven is choose to follow the straight and narrow path into God's direct presence. God is waiting for you."

Pete exclaimed, "Well, let me tell you, I'm going to make record time traveling through Purgatory. I will be with God very soon."

Angelo smiled, "You will indeed, IF you don't choose to stop along the way. God wants you with Him as soon as possible. But, God will wait until you are ready."

That irritated Pete, "What do you mean, until I'm ready? I'm ready right now!"

Angelo chuckled, "I'm glad you think so. The truth is, like most people, you are starting this journey still desiring things other than God. Only after you change to wanting God over everything and everyone else will you choose to enter Heaven.

During your life you grew and matured into the person you are who chose God over not God. Purgatory is where you can continue to grow. When you are ready, then you will accept God's invitation to share His life.

Remember, you always have free will. The choices are yours. Are you ready to start?"

"Yes!" replied Pete.

Angelo sighed and, with a sad smile, said, "Well then, know that I will be praying for you. I'll see you in Heaven."

"Aren't you coming with me?" asked Pete, startled at the thought of Angelo leaving him.

Pete could see the tenderness in Angelo's eyes, as he said, "No Pete. I have watched over you all your life. I have protected and guided you when you would let me. If I go with you now, I will be tempted to create shortcuts for you, tell you important answers. But you have to learn and accept things that only the Holy Spirit can teach you. You have to make your own choices based on the truths you have learned and accepted.

I will end with one last point. Change is often painful, but the right change is worth the pain. Also, as He did during your life, from time to time God will send you people to provide insight.

OK that was two last points."

Pete smiled at that admission.

Angelo gave Pete a hug and then watched as Pete started up the hill, following the straight and narrow path. As he walked, Pete was wondering how Satan could delay him. Pete was determined to swiftly walk straight through Purgatory to Heaven without stopping.

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Chapter 3: Heavenly Peace

Pete was thinking hard about how Satan could delay him and wondering why Angelo had said Pete had to grow and mature more to become willing to choose God. Of

course Pete chose God. Hadn't he made the choice as soon as the judge asked? What did Angelo mean saying that Pete desired things other than God? Angelo had better hurry to meet Pete at the other end because Pete would make record time walking through Purgatory!

As he reached the top of the hill and started down Pete saw a beautiful meadow. The straight and narrow path split the valley as the path continued straight across and disappeared over another hill into what he now realized was the glow from Heaven. At the bottom of the hill, there was an inviting little bench. Best of all was the sight of people relaxing on puffy little clouds floating in an azure sky.

As he came to the bottom of the hill, a little cloud came floating down and rested next to the path. Pete eagerly lay down on the cloud and immediately drifted up and away. Pete felt a relaxation far beyond any he had ever known. It felt heavenly. He let himself drift along not thinking about anything. On the cloud Pete had no worries. Indeed, he couldn't remember ever having any worries. He just floated on his little cloud, unaware of the passage of time.

Suddenly, Pete's reverie was broken when he heard his name shouted from the straight and narrow path. Pete drifted down to see who was calling out to him.

"Uncle Pete! Uncle Pete! It's me, Ray", a man shouted excitedly. Pete got off his cloud and embraced his nephew. Pete was very happy to see Ray, but even so, Pete noticed that the extreme relaxation of the cloud disappeared the moment he got up. Off the cloud, Pete's happiness came from the reality of seeing his nephew, and not from a hazy forgetfulness.

"It's great to see you, Ray", said Pete, "Why I hardly recognize you. You look so different, so much older."

"Well sure I look older Uncle Pete." Ray smiled, "After all, you died 40 years ago."

"40 years! You've got to be kidding! I've been floating on this cloud for 40 years? It felt like just a minute."

Pete would have to think about that later, but right now he wanted to catch up with his nephew. So he said, "Tell me about your life. How is everyone doing?"

They visited and talked a long time. Then Ray asked, "So this is Heaven? Is it nice on the clouds?"

"Oh yes," Pete said, "It's wonderful. You've never experienced such relaxation, such freedom from worry, you have not a care in eternity while on the cloud."

"Great!" said Ray, "Let's drift along side by side."

So they each climbed on a cloud and drifted off. Pete was again quickly absorbed in the bliss of floating without a care. He soon lost track of his nephew, but that wasn't important. Nothing felt important. Pete was sure Ray was enjoying floating along without a care. No pain, no worries, no struggles, no thoughts, just the bliss of total relaxation. Then suddenly Pete heard his name called out again. This time it was a female voice. He drifted back to the path wondering who this woman could be.

"Uncle Pete! Uncle Pete!" she exclaimed as he climbed off his cloud. She gave him a huge hug saying, "I know you from your pictures! My name is Betty! I'm Ray's daughter! I'm your great-niece!"

Pete exclaimed, "How wonderful to meet you! Tell me about yourself!" Pete eagerly drank in all the details of his great-niece's life. When she casually said that he had been dead 60 years, Pete was amazed.

He looked at his bliss cloud. He looked at the straight and narrow path disappearing over the next hill with the glow of Heaven shining in the distance. He wondered for the first time what he might have experienced with God during those 60 years. His great-niece eagerly took possession of a cloud and drifted away, a look of peaceful relaxation on her face.

But Pete sat down on the little bench to think. A woman wearing the traditional habit of a Catholic nun came walking down the hill. She completely ignored an inviting little cloud that drifted down and bumped against the path. As she passed the bench she greeted Pete nicely without breaking her stride. Pete asked her to answer a question for him. The nun came back to the bench and sat down.

Pete asked, "Why are you passing by? On the cloud you can have total relaxation, forgetful bliss. It's wonderful!"

The nun smiled, answering, "I'm going on because God is not here. I have been working all my life to improve myself into a person who will fully share God's life. I'm not going to stop now. Sure, to avoid making choices has a lot of appeal. But, making choices, especially hard choices, is how we develop our ability to love. To be with God is worth any struggle." Then the nun smiled again and said, "You are welcome to travel with me if you wish."

Pete looked longingly at the little drifting clouds. It would be so easy to drift away again. Pete asked the nun, "What greater happiness is there than the bliss of complete relaxation and comfort?"

The nun smiled, "Love. To share a mutual love with God is the greatest joy. But to share it, we must actively live it. Have you seen God here? Talked to Him? Hugged Him? Let Him hug you? Of course not! Now, do you choose to drift away ignoring reality or do you choose to walk the straight and narrow path into God's arms, finding true joy by sharing His life?"

Pete stood. "Let's walk." he said.

As they climbed the next hill, Pete kept looking back at the beguiling little clouds. Pete realized he was feeling for the first time the pain of Purgatory. The pain of Purgatory is the pain of choosing. Pete was choosing God, but the alternative was so attractive that the choosing hurt.

Pete slowed down, slowed down more, and then stopped. He took a step back towards the little puffy clouds. The nun stopped, turned around and said, "Really? ... Really? You're going to give up time with God to spend time drifting thoughtlessly? Really?"

Pete whined, "Well. I ... I don't know."

His heart ached with the pain of choosing.

"It's up to you." the nun said. "Tell you what. I'll count to ten, and then I will go on. You are more than welcome to come with me.

"One... two..."

Pete stood frozen with indecision.

"Three... Four..."

She smiled and held out her hand encouragingly.



"Five... Six... Seven..."

Pete finally took her hand and slowly resumed walking up the hill.

The nun hurriedly said "Eight Nine Ten" and started walking with Pete, smiling at his wise decision.

Pete looked toward the glow of Heaven showing over the hill. Having chosen God, Pete thought that maybe Purgatory was over and he was about to enter Heaven. He had no idea of the pains to come.

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Chapter 4: You, Me, Them and Us

When Pete and the nun topped the hill, they stopped holding hands. They stared at the sight before them. They saw another valley with the straight and narrow path running across to another hill. The glow of Heaven showed a little more brightly over the far hill. On both sides of the straight and narrow path were meeting halls stretching to the horizon. These were surrounded by crowds of people. As the pair descended Pete realized that the people were, as the Bible says, from every nation, race, and creed. Pete was amazed. What were all these non-Catholics doing here? The few he had seen choose God he could understand. They must be very good people, but thousands and thousands?

Pete sat on a bench and exclaimed, "I'm so confused! Listen. My Guardian Angel told me that once you enter Purgatory, you are assured of eventually entering Heaven. I always figured that the Roman Catholic faith was the one true way to get to Heaven. But if the other religions are wrong, what are all these other people doing here? I don't get it!"

The nun sat down and gently replied, "Let me answer that with a parable. Consider two people who are standing in the middle of a deep forest, trying to find their way home. It is a very dark night. Each one has an unlit candle. Along comes a third person in the dark, carrying a lit candle. This third person offers to light the candles of our first two people. One refuses the light insisting that he can find his own way. The other lets his candle be lit and together the two people with lit candles look for the path home. So now in the dark nighttime forest we have two people with lit candles working together and one person with an unlit candle working on his own. Who do you expect will find the way home first?"

Pete answered, "The two with the lit candles, working together."

"Of course", the nun smiled, "Now consider the two with the lit candles. Are they better than the one with an unlit candle? Is the lone person with an unlit candle somehow evil while the two with lit candles are virtuous? Are the two with lit candles morally better than the one with an unlit candle?"

Pete admitted that having lit candles did not make the two morally better, but couldn't help pointing out that lit candles are more useful in the dark.

"Yes they are." the nun smilingly agreed and then continued, "We live." She stopped to chuckle. "We used to live, in a world of spiritual darkness. Christ is the light of the world. He offers His light to human beings through Baptism. Some accept it. Some refuse it. We Christians who accept the unearned gift of Baptism are not better than anyone else, we are just better equipped to find our way to God because we have allowed the light of Christ to enter our souls like a flame lighting a candle."

"But aren't all non-Catholics sinners?" asked Pete. "

The nun laughed out loud. "Aren't we all sinners?" she replied. "Let me tell you the Roman Catholic view of you, me, them and us." The nun leaned back, took a deep breath, then, looking Pete straight in the eye, she began.

"YOU

You are a beloved, precious child of God.

God loves you with all His heart, with all His strength, with all His soul.

ME

I am a sinner.

On my own, without God's help, I would destroy myself with my sinning.

I would trap myself in the slavery of sin.

THEM

All human beings, like you, are precious, beloved children of God.

All human beings, like me, are sinners.

US

We human beings are really all in the same situation.

None of us deserves God's love and yet God loves all of us.

In fact, God loves all of us equally.

God loves every human being personally, passionately, absolutely, eternally."

The nun leaned back and let Pete think a minute then gently continued, "So you see, God wants every human being to come through Purgatory and ultimately join Him in Heaven. Every one of these people belongs here because, when given the choice, they chose God rather than not God. Of course, the non-Christians need to acknowledge Jesus as their savior before they can share a mutual love with Him, but their most important judgment has been made. Here in Purgatory each of us decides when he or she is ready to go on to an active relationship of mutual love with Jesus. I, for one, am ready to go on right now. How about you?"

Pete looked at the glow of Heaven beckoning him over the next hill. Pete didn't say it out loud, but he had some reservations, some questions he had never asked while alive, so he wasn't so sure he wanted to go on just yet.

Finally, Pete said, "No. I'll hang out here awhile if you don't mind." The nun nodded and answered, "Come along whenever you are ready. God is waiting." With that they parted.

After watching the nun disappear over the next hill, Pete began to explore the rich diversity of people around him. He left the bench to walk through the crowd. He came upon a notice saying that anyone could occupy any unused meeting hall and put their discussion topic on the sign out front. Passersby explained to Pete that he could wander in and out of discussions anytime.

Trying to get clear in his head what it was that bothered him, Pete walked along, checking out the topics and chatting with several people. Most of them planned to stay in this valley until everyone else acknowledged their religion as the one true religion. At first Pete thought wryly that many of them would be there a long time, since they weren't Roman Catholic. But, if he was so sure, why was he hanging around and not continuing on?

Pete noticed a sign for a discussion of Hinduism. He had always wondered about Hinduism, so he walked in. Inside there were chairs set in a semi-circle and a woman speaker seated up front. Pete sat down to listen.

Someone in the crowd raised a hand and said, "Summarize Hinduism in three minutes." The speaker answered, "Why only three minutes? We have lots of time here." That drew appreciative chuckles from the listeners.

The woman stood up and started, "I am happy to summarize my faith as follows. Energy can neither be created nor destroyed. The sum of all the energies in the universe remains the same. Energy can only be transformed from one form of energy into another form of energy.

When you treat someone the way they should be treated you turn negative energy into positive energy. When you treat someone the way they should NOT be treated, you turn positive energy into negative energy. Karma brings the energy you generated back on you, whether positive or negative. Think of it this way; as you sow so shall you reap. Karma keeps the universe in balance and delivers justice.

Furthermore, a soul of pure energy dwells in every living thing. The body is mortal but the soul is immortal. Each time a living body dies, its soul is reincarnated into a better life or a worse life depending on its overall karma. The goal of life is to create more and more positive energy until finally, you stop being reincarnated and attain nirvana by merging with Lord Brahma, the creator, as a drop of rain merges with the sea."

The woman sat down when she had finished and the crowd gave her a round of applause. She had beaten the three-minute limit!

The discussion continued, but Pete focused only on the parts about karma. It sounded very reasonable and logical and balanced. How was Pete's karma balance sheet? What if going over the next hill did not take him to God, but took him to reincarnation into a bad life? What if he had to live a whole life as a sickly person, or an animal? How long would it take him to get to nirvana? He had better not continue down the straight and narrow path until he figured this out! Pete left the Hinduism discussion worried. He went from sign to sign checking out what discussions were going on. He was looking for answers, but could not put his questions into words.

A sign for "Sin, a Protestant Christian understanding" caught his eye. Pete had always worried about sin, but never really thought about it much, so he went in.

The speaker was a minister, a good man of the cloth. He was well into a stem-winder of a sermon. Pete took a seat and listened.

"... Sin is evil and unjust. God is holy and just. All sin and evil must be punished to satisfy God's holy justice. Decide now. Do you want to violate the will of God and force Him to punish you? Or do you want to submit to the will of God, accept His benevolence and live every moment in accordance with His divine command? God has set before you the choice: life or death, blessing or curse, obedience or punishment. Take your punishment for the sins you have committed. Walk the straight and narrow path. Never deviate. For off the path is a minefield of sins waiting to bring the full wrath of God upon you.

"Remember! God is Holy. Nothing unholy is permitted in His presence. Being a sinner, you must be purified before you can enter Heaven. On the path there is fire and brimstone to burn all sin out of you. Keep your heart focused on Jesus, endure what you must and you shall win the prize in the end. ..."

Now Pete was really scared. He ran out of the meeting hall! Pete knew he had quite a list of sins that God could punish him for. Over the next hill could be fire and

brimstone. How could Pete walk through that? If not fire and brimstone, it could be reincarnation as an aardvark! Pete had only a vague idea what the Catholic Church taught on these issues. Why had he ignored religion classes? His parish had offered them time after time. Pete looked anxiously at each sign offering topics. None of them offered him any hope.

Not knowing how to proceed, Pete wandered back to the straight and narrow path and sat on a bench. He gazed at the glow streaming over the next hill and worried about what he would find over that summit. Pete felt a desire to be with God, but was worried about the price he would have to pay. Maybe he would just forget reality and the passage of time. Maybe he would go back to the heavenly relaxation of floating on a little cloud.

As he sat and worried, Pete heard someone come down the hill into the valley. He turned to see a man with the roman collar, ring and large crucifix of a Roman Catholic Bishop. Pete stood and introduced himself and asked the Bishop to sit down. They sat on the bench side by side and the Bishop asked, "How can I help you, my son?"

Pete meant to speak slowly and rationally, but his voice betrayed him by rising in pitch while his words came in a rush. "I know God loves me and all that. But. Well. Gee. What if I get reincarnated as a rat? I've done bad things. I've created bad karma and now karma will get me! What do I do?"

The Bishop started to say, "God's love is greater than our sin ..."

Pete interrupted, continuing to plead, "If karma doesn't get me, then maybe I'll have to walk through fire and brimstone to get to God. I can't take that kind of pain. I was burned once and it was horrible. Horrible I tell you! I know I deserve God's justice burning all that sin out of me, but I can't take it. Pain is painful! Doesn't God know that? There's only so much a person can take. Why did I have to sin so much? If you hear my confession, will God stop all the pain? I'll confess to anything if you'll save me from punishment!"

The Bishop held up his hands and gently said, "Whoa. Don't worry. You will be fine. God Himself will see to it."

Pete barely took a breath before continuing, "He will? That's good because I was worried. You know. I've been bad. I've created bad karma and bad sins and stuff and I deserve punishment. I don't want to be a turtle. Please talk to God for me. He'll listen to you."

"Will YOU listen to me?" the Bishop asked smiling.

Pete immediately carried on, "Yes. Yes. I'll listen. I'm sorry. I don't mean to bother you. I'm just so scared. Can you stop karma from making me a mouse? I'm sorry. I'm sorry. ... I'm listening now." Pete took a deep breath and finally stopped talking but his lips quivered and his body twitched while his eyes pleaded with the Bishop for help.

The Bishop put a hand on each of Pete's shoulders and looked deep into Pete's eyes and said, "You are a beloved child of God. He will share His joy in Heaven with you whenever you choose to join Him."

"Thank you." said Pete calming down. "It's just that I've learned a lot here that I never knew before and now I don't know what to do. And ... I'm listening now."

When Pete finally began listening, the Bishop continued, "Let us think. You came past the valley where you could float along dreamily forgetting reality. You chose to continue on from there to here. What were you looking for? What is better than relaxed forgetfulness?"

Pete remembered his talk with the nun, "Love." he answered.

"Exactly!" replied the Bishop with satisfaction. "To share a mutual love is the greatest source of happiness. The greater the love you share, the greater your happiness. So, who has the greatest love for you?"

Pete didn't have to think about this one, "Jesus." he replied immediately.

"Very good!" said the Bishop, "Now we're making progress. You know that there are no barriers between you and Jesus. Just walk the straight and narrow path through the next several valleys and you will bring yourself to Heaven where Jesus is waiting for you. So, exactly why are you not going toward Him right now?"

"Well," said Pete, "I'm worried about all the bad karma I created and ..."

The Bishop interrupting him saying, "Do you really think of God as a big accountant in the sky tabulating totals on a calculator to make sure things balance?"

Pete couldn't help grinning at this image.

"No. I guess not." he replied.

"OK. Let's talk about karma."

"Great!" exclaimed Pete "Can you stop it from turning me into a pig?"

The Bishop looked toward the glow from Heaven for a moment and sighed. Slowly bringing his gaze back to Pete, he began,

"Let me tell you a parable, a story. Once upon a time, there was a girl burning candles in her room when a gust of wind blew her curtains into the flames. Her curtains caught on fire and soon the whole house burned down. Her parents' home was totally destroyed. Yet, her parents did not force her to pay back the value of what she had so carelessly destroyed."

"Well no, of course not. No loving parents would do that to a child."

"Not even hold that negative balance against her and make her pay it when she had grown up and could afford to?"

"No. You forgive your children. That's part of raising them."

"Were her parents more loving, more forgiving than God?"

"I wouldn't think so."

"Neither do I. The problem with the idea of karma is that it ignores the nature of God. Karma with its exacting justice does not allow for mercy; does not allow for love. So the difference between the Hindu view of reality and the Christian view hinges on whether God is indifferent to human beings, looking only for justice and balance or whether, as we Christians learn from the Bible, God is love."

Pete was feeling better, but still uncertain, "So how do we know which view is the accurate view of God?"

The Bishop thought a moment, and then said, "Say again why you chose to leave the forgetful relaxation of floating on a cloud? What are you striving for?"

"Love." answered Pete, "I want to feel God's love and love Him in return."

"Good answer! Now, let's use that good answer in another approach. Let's say that you are God."

"What!?" Pete gasped.

"Let's just pretend for a moment; for the sake of discussion."

"Oh. OK."

"Now let's say that as God you are about to create human beings and you can either force strict accounting on them and eventually have each absorbed into yourself

OR you can create each human being as a separate, unique soul capable of loving you throughout eternity. Which would you choose?"

"I choose love."

"Are you wiser, more loving than God?"

"No."

"Than why would you think God would choose strict balance over love?"

Pete felt relief as he thought about this. He really, really didn't want to be reincarnated as a frog. "You know," Pete said, "Hindus are good people. How did they get it so wrong?"

The Bishop replied, "Hindus are good people. Actually, they did very well figuring out a system that works pretty well for their society. They did so without the GIFT of God's revelation. God chose to reveal Himself and His truths to the Jews and the Christians. That doesn't mean we are better than other people. It just means we have been blessed with undeserved gifts that we get to share with the world."

Pete was feeling much better, but still had a nagging worry. He still had all those sins on his soul. So he said, "That's great. Thank you. But I'm still worried. I did a lot of sinning in my life. And, well, I was never a big fan of Confession."

The Bishop grinned, "Gee, and so many people just lo-o-o-o-ve Confession! It's too late for the gift of Sacramental Reconciliation now anyway. So, what exactly are you worried about?"

Glancing back toward the discussion halls, Pete answered, "I've heard that God's justice demands that we be purified by being punished for our sins. We have to walk through fire and brimstone to get to God."

"Actually, God does not punish us for sinning."

"No?" Pete thought this was great news.

"The reality is worse than that."

What was worse than being punished for sinning? Pete waited anxiously for the Bishop to continue.

"God is a loving parent. He may chastise us for our sins with small punishments that do us no harm, but God will never seriously harm for any reason. The terrible consequences of sin must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but as following from the very nature of sin."

"What does that mean?" asked Pete

"Consider the example of lying. Have you ever seen a man tell a lie?"

"Yes." Pete hoped the Bishop would ask for examples. Pete had some good ones. But the Bishop just asked, "Did he get hit by lightning when he told the lie?"

Now Pete had to smile, "No, no lightning."

"Did the lie destroy trust; ruin a relationship; cause pain?"

"Well, yes."

"Destroying trust; ruining relationships; causing pain are the natural consequences of lying. Those consequences are why God named lying as a sin.

"God does mildly chastise us, but real harm comes from the sins themselves."

Pete was lost, so he asked, "What do you mean by chastise? How is it different from punishment? You have got to be clearer!"

The Bishop ignored Pete's rudeness, and continued, "A chastisement is enough to get our attention and convince us to rethink what we are doing, but does not harm us.

"Let me explain it with an example: If you drive 100 miles per hour over the speed limit, say 155 miles per hour in a 55 mile per hour zone, then you could get a ticket. You could get chastised for breaking the law. But if you do drive 155 miles per hour in a 55 mile per hour zone, do not worry about getting a speeding ticket. Worry about killing yourself! The chastisement of a speeding ticket won't really hurt you, but crashing at 155 miles per hour probably would.

"Does that make it clear? I'll say again: the terrible consequences of sin follow from the very nature of sin. They are not a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without. Never worry about God's little chastisements for sinning. Worry rather about the natural consequences of sins. One of those consequences is that sin destroys our trust in God. You fear going over the next hill because you do not trust God."

Pete exclaimed, "I do too trust God!"

The Bishop smiled, "Great! So let's walk over the next hill toward God."

"Oh! Well, maybe not." Pete shrank in place on the bench.

The Bishop pressed on, "You are afraid of having to walk through fire and brimstone. Tell me. Have you been forced to do anything against your will while here in Purgatory?"

"No", Pete answered, hope awakening in his chest.

"So, God has continued to bless you with free will. You make your own choices. If there was fire and brimstone ahead, you could turn around and walk away from it, right?"

"Yes" Hope was brightening now. "Yes. God has not taken away my free will up to now, so I can trust Him to not force me in the future."

"Wonderful!" said the Bishop, "We'll see if you really trust Him when we start walking. But there is another issue and we might as well handle it right now. While God will not inflict pain on you, there are pains of the heart for anyone who shares the life of God. Let me ask you this. Will you walk to God, enduring whatever comes, in order to give God the joy of holding you in His arms?"

"I'd like to but I don't know if I can take it." whined Pete.

The Bishop stood and said, "Do you trust God? I am going on to the open, waiting arms of Jesus. "

Pete looked up at the next hill and noticed again the glow from Heaven; a little brighter than before. He stood and said, "If you let me come with you, I will go on."

They walked up and over the next hill with the Bishop setting a brisk pace and Pete walking a step behind, peeking ahead over the Bishop's shoulder.

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#### Chapter 5: Easy money

As they topped the hill and entered the next valley, Pete was relieved at the sight that greeted them. There was no fire or brimstone. On the contrary; there were twin casinos, one on each side of the straight and narrow path. Both of the casinos throbbed with excitement, flash, style, and elegance.

The Bishop didn't stop, but Pete wanted to take just a minute to check out the inside of a casino before traveling on.

Pete was awestruck at the grandeur and beauty of the place. A beautiful hostess walked up, welcomed him by name, and handed him a membership card with his name on it. She smiled and told him that he had \$100 credit on his account to start with. Pete

said to her, "You know it won't take long to lose that much. Then I can continue on my way to God. But I'll take a look and see what games you have."

Pete walked up to a slot machine, sat down, put in his card, and pushed the button. Pete lost on the first try. "See?" he said to himself, "I'll be out of here in no time." The next play Pete won. And then he won again. He kept on winning. In every casino he had ever visited, Pete had won just often enough to make it interesting. Here Pete lost just often enough to make it interesting. His balance grew and grew.

After a long but exciting day of winning money, Pete felt hungry and so went exploring the casino. He soon found a buffet. So he checked and, of course, he could easily afford the buffet. Refreshed by a wonderful meal, he gambled some more and soon had a \$20,000 balance.

Pete wondered what all he could do with his winnings. So he wandered out the back door of the casino and found several limousines waiting in a line.

Pete climbed in the back of the nearest one; swiped his card and the driver said, "Where would you like to go?"

Pete said, "I'm new here, where can we go?"

The driver smiled, "I see the balance on your card. Your choices are endless. You can play golf on a championship course. You can play tennis, polo, jai alai, if you wish. You can snow ski down mountains. You can stay in a penthouse suite at a five star hotel. You can take an ocean cruise. You will have to go back in the casino though if you want to buy a yacht of your own."

"Do you really think I could win that much?" asked Pete.

"Well, you might have to do some vigorous gambling, but yes, at this casino you can definitely win that much."

Pete chose to spend a few luxurious days in a suite in a five star hotel. He satisfied his every little whim and still had a good balance on his card.

Several trips to the casino later, Pete decided to try the other casino. The glow from Heaven caught his eye as he crossed the straight and narrow path, but he hesitated only a moment. The other casino accepted his card and he continued to win and win and win.

The second casino soon became his favorite because this one had a chocolate buffet! It had every kind of chocolate you can imagine: smooth, creamy, and delicious. Pete started hanging out in the chocolate buffet all the time until he realized he could afford to have any chocolate he wanted delivered to him wherever he wanted. Pete lived in the lap of luxury, enjoying his easy money, for who knows how long.

One day Pete was sitting on his 50 foot yacht wondering what to do today. Gamble? Why? He had this yacht and a half million dollars cash in the safe. Golf? Nah! He had played every course until he knew each hole in detail. Ski? Nah! He had skied several days last week. Thankfully, his reverie was interrupted when a stranger, a woman, asked to see the yacht. Pete showed her around.

As he finished the tour, the woman said excitedly, "Can I buy this yacht from you? I have \$2,000,000 in cash and I can get more if you want it."

Pete looked at her and saw the excitement he used to have at what had been his newfound wealth. Maybe he could be that excited again if he had to start over.

"Tell you what," Pete replied, "I will sell you this yacht for \$10. You can have the half million cash in the safe as well."



"Thank you. Thank you", the woman cried, "Are you sure? I don't mind paying for it."

"No. No. Just give me \$10 cash in hand. That makes it legal." So the woman gave Pete \$10 and he walked off the yacht with nothing else but the clothes he was wearing and his casino card.

Pete headed straight to the casino and proceeded to gamble. Is it really gambling when you consistently come out ahead? What was Pete going to do with his winnings this time? Just do the same old things? Bored, he headed out the front to cross the straight and narrow path to the other casino. As he crossed he looked up and saw the glow of Heaven coming over the next hill and stopped. He sat down on a little bench and waited. Pete did not know what he was waiting for, but he was content just to wait.

A man came walking up the straight and narrow path. He smiled at Pete and said, "Hi. You look lost. Can I help? My name is Bob."

Pete said, "I've got a question."

"OK, ask." Bob smiled and sat down.

Pete's situation clarified in his mind as he chose his words, "I have easy access to money like I wanted all my life. I can afford anything I want. I have luxuries at my fingertips. Why am I bored?"

Bob thought a moment then said, "Things can give you comfort, convenience, even luxury. However, things cannot give you love. Life without love, even luxurious life, is ultimately boring. Being loved, on the other hand, never gets boring. You are welcome to walk with me toward the greatest source of love."

Looking up at the glow of Heaven shining over the next hill, Pete said, "Yes! Let's go to Jesus." His heart sang within him as he left material wealth behind and hurried toward spiritual wealth.

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Chapter 6: Sports

Pete stood stunned a moment at the top of the next hill, pausing to look out over a sportsman's paradise. There were sports stadiums, hunting ranges, racecourses; every imaginable sport venue stretching across a vast valley to the next hill far off on the horizon. The very first was Wrigley Field, home of his beloved Chicago Cubs. Pete had never been to a game there and he had always wanted to. Bob would not leave the straight and narrow path. But Pete HAD to check out Wrigley Field!

Pete wondered if his casino card would get him in to the game. How would he pay admission? Then again he figured somehow, some way, it probably would not be a problem. As he got close to the ticket window, a man in a Cubs uniform ran up to him and said, "Our bat boy called in sick! Will you act as bat boy for us today?"

"Uh, OK." Pete replied as the man grabbed his arm and led him hurriedly toward the players' entrance.

Before he knew it, Pete was in a perfectly fitted uniform with his name on it and was standing on the infield grass of Wrigley Field. What a thrill! All the players and coaches were friendly and Pete happily did everything they asked of him.

As the game ended, one of the players invited Pete to come to dinner with them. As they walked out, Pete wondered where he would stay. "Oh, there's a place available next to mine!" said another player. Just then the head coach came over and told Pete to be at practice tomorrow morning. They had a game in the afternoon.

Practice next day felt totally natural. Pete hit balls easily and fielded like a pro. As they had lunch before the afternoon game, the coach told Pete that Pete would be playing in the game. Pete would be right outfielder for a game in Wrigley Field! Can you believe it? Amazingly enough Pete excelled in his new position.

In the ninth inning, the Cubs were behind by three runs when Pete came to bat. The bases were loaded. Pete struggled a bit, coming to a full count with two strikes and three foul balls. Here came the last pitch, a fastball. Pete swung with all his might hitting the ball squarely with a loud crack! The ball - went - sailing - into - the - bleachers. It was a grand slam home run to win the game! The - crowd - went - wild as Pete circled the bases. Can you believe it?

Over the next several weeks (or was it months?), the coach had Pete play all the different positions. Pete was a very versatile player. He even coached a few games. The crowd roared at his exploits. While the team did not always win, Pete was a superstar baseball player.

The crowd was always enthusiastic, even adoring of him. But the adoration of a crowd is not love. One day, a reporter asked Pete, "How does it feel to be the MVP of your fourth World Series in a row?" Pete looked at her and said, "Has it really been four years?"

Pete felt a growing desire to share a mutual love with the one who loves Pete the most. He decided to travel on toward Jesus.

That night, Pete told the players and coaches that it was time for him to move on. He was worried about letting the team down, but none of them seemed terribly upset. The team had gotten a new batboy that day and he looked like a natural.

The next day, Pete walked down the straight and narrow path and came to the Augusta National Golf Course. Wouldn't you know, someone needed a caddie. Three green jackets later, he left golf and walked down to an Olympic Village.

Pete had always wanted to try gymnastics. Wouldn't you know, they needed someone to help set up the equipment. Two gold medals later Pete left the Olympic Village to walk down the straight and narrow path to Old Trafford, home of Manchester United soccer team. Wouldn't you know, they needed a stadium tour guide. One FIFA World Cup later he left soccer to walk down to the Daytona race track.

Pete had ignored the benches along the straight and narrow path in front of all the other sports venues but he sat down on this one and waited. A man in the traditional hooded robes of a Catholic monk walked up and sat next to Pete on the bench and smiled at him. "How's it going?" the monk asked.

"It's going great." Pete replied. "I always hoped Heaven would be like this."

The monk smiled gently, "This isn't Heaven you know. This is Purgatory. Heaven may or may not have sports but Heaven has all that I want."

"Are you sure?" Pete asked. "I could get you on a team. How's that sound? You could be a super star with me."

The monk looked wistfully at the sports stadiums along the path.

"Are you willing to risk having no sports to be with God?" he asked Pete. "The thing is, it is good that this is hard to leave. Choosing God doesn't mean much if the alternative is unattractive. However, choosing God when the other option is wonderful, now that is significant. And you know, I suspect that the choices will get harder as we go

along. But I choose God because He chose me. He called me to Himself. He loves me. I love Him in return. It's that simple."

After a moment's pause, the monk continued, "Is feeling the thrill of sports super stardom what you want most? Or would you rather experience your true super star status in the heart of God? I appreciate your offer and yes, I would enjoy being a super star. But I will leave this behind to get to God. Will you join me or settle for less than complete joy?"

Pete looked at the Daytona racetrack; heard the crowd roar as a race started without him. He said, "Look, you're right, but how can I leave this?"

The monk replied, "To leave it does not mean you don't want it. It just means you want God more. You can see the glow from Heaven. You can see these sports venues. Which do you want more? Which are you willing to give up?"

Pete snapped his head back to the monk, "Give up? No! I want it all!"

The monk pointed out, "To stay here is to not go to God. To go to God is to leave here. You cannot have both. Where do you choose to spend eternity?"

Pete replied uncertainly, "I want eternity with God, but, but... Aww Gee."

"Why wait?" the monk asked.

Now the pains of choosing were sharp. But, yes, Pete had to choose.

The monk quietly said, "Any time not spent with God is time spent ignoring God. You can move toward God right now. What do you choose?"

Pete knew he would go to God eventually. Staying would only prolong the choice; prolong the pain of deciding. With one last glance back at the scenes of his glory, Pete made up his heart and his mind.

"I will go to God now." He said. The two stood and walked over the next hill.

Pete was surprised to notice that, once he made the choice, it became easy. He found himself eagerly walking away from sports glory and towards God.

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#### Chapter 7: Glorious Music

Pete heard the next valley before he saw it. As they neared the top of the hill, Pete heard live music; great rolling waves of sound that engulfed him and stirred his soul. By the time they reached the floor of the valley, Pete was stepping to the beat of his favorite songs.

When they reached a gate to the concert, Pete immediately turned to go in. "Come on!" he shouted to the monk, "Sounds like a great time!" The monk said, "Thanks, but no thanks. I'm going to God. You sure you want to stop?" "Oh, yeah!" cried Pete, "Just for a minute." And so they parted.

The concert was in full swing. Pete merged easily into the crowd. He made his way closer and closer to the stage. Soon, he was right up against the stage, singing along. Suddenly, one of the musicians pointed at Pete and waved for him to come up on the stage.

Pete felt a little apprehension, but remembering his success at sports, he gathered up his courage and vaulted onto the stage. Someone handed him a microphone and asked what song he wanted to sing. He wasn't sure they would know it, but he mentioned an old favorite that he hadn't heard in a long time. The band greeted his suggestion enthusiastically and launched right into the song. Someone pushed him to sing lead. Not

wanting to be rude, Pete stepped to the center of the stage and belted out the song. The crowd roared its approval.

It felt just like when Pete had hit a home run in baseball, just like when he had performed a perfect routine in gymnastics, just like when ...

That's when Pete knew. When the song ended, he waved a "Thank you!" to the crowd and hurried out of the stadium and back onto the straight and narrow path. He could see the monk half way to the far hill, and shouted to him. Pete ran until he caught up with the monk and they walked on to the next valley together. Pete felt wonderfully happy. He now understood that the pain of Purgatory comes in the choosing. And the joy of Purgatory comes in having chosen God. The glow from Heaven over the hill was quite bright now.

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Chapter 8: Family Reunion

As Pete topped the next hill and started down to the next valley, he noticed a series of hotels. The sign on the first welcomed his family name. Could it be? Could he finally see his parents again and Grandma and Uncle George? Pete looked toward the glow over the next hill and hesitated. Isn't being with family the same as being with God? Wouldn't God understand if he visited with his family? He hesitated a moment, but then his mother came racing out of the hotel and buried him in a huge hug. His indecision was over. He didn't even see the monk continue on.

His mother had a huge buffet laid out, including an entire table devoted to chocolate delights. That first night Pete chatted with his parents and with his goofy Uncle Phil and with old man Charlie. He got to know his cousins better. His buddies stopped by. It was a very happy time. As the days, weeks, and months passed, Pete lived in a non-stop party and he enjoyed every minute of it.

But a few family members were missing. Where were they? Pete knew they had died before he did. His mother explained, "I am certain that none of our family chose Hell. So they must either be working their way through the temptations up to here or they've gone on to God."

"Why have YOU stayed here?" Pete asked. "I thought you loved God with all your heart."

"Well, yes, of course!" his mother answered. "But family! Family is everything to me. I had to see you. Besides, your sister should be along soon. I am sure Nancy will stop here to see us." That settled that. The discussion was over.

Pete's Dad took him on long, lazy days of fishing; just the two of them; sitting in a boat, catching an occasional fish and throwing it back while they talked about nothing and everything. One conversation in particular stood out in Pete's mind.

"So Dad," asked Pete as he tugged his line to bob his bobber, "you love Mom a lot right?"

"Yes." said his Dad, interested to see where this was going.

"And you've loved her a long time, right?"

"Yes." said his Dad, smiling outright now.

Pete continued, "I've been thinking, trying to figure out love. So, ... can you explain love?"

His Dad let the question hang in the air. With a mischievous glint in his eye, he reeled in his hook; checked his bait; cast it back out. Then he leaned back and stared out over the water. Finally he began to answer.

"Pope John Paul II called love 'sincere solicitude and disinterested service.'" Pete's Dad then paused for effect before continuing, "I'm certainly no Pope." He paused even longer and grinned a little in anticipation, then continued, "Neither am I a fancy philosopher nor a theorizing theologian nor a pedantic professor nor an elucidating lecturer."

Pete rolled his eyes while his Dad enjoyed the moment. Then his Dad got serious and continued,

"I am a fisherman. Fishermen have time to think. I'll tell you five things I think about love, one for each finger on one hand.

"First: Love is by its nature a gift, unearned and undeserved. If we put conditions on our love, it is not true love.

"Second: the word 'love' is a verb, not a noun. Love is something we do, not something we fall into and fall out of.

"Third: Choice is where love is given or denied. Our loving is in our choosing. When you freely choose to benefit the one you love, then you are exercising true love.

"Fourth: in our marriages is where we develop our ability to love. In the day-to-day realities of marriage we deepen our ability to love by choosing to love over and over and over again. Even those who never marry learn to love by living in a society founded on marriage.

"Fifth: I have loved your mother, my wife, for a long time now. Our love is a mutual and true love. I know her very well. I can tell you what she will do in most circumstances. However, I do not understand my wife. Why she does what she does is often a mystery to me. And that's a good thing. By loving and cherishing this woman whom I do not understand, I become more capable of loving without understanding. That's good because I want to truly love God and God is beyond my ability to ever understand. Marriage to someone of the opposite gender helps me develop my ability to love someone I do not understand; helps me develop my ability to love God."

With that, Pete's Dad lapsed into silence, watching his bobber.

"How do you know when it's true love?" asked Pete in a small voice.

"Well, I know that my wife's love for me is true love because I give her good, valid reasons to not love me and yet she chooses to love me anyway."

Just then, Pete's Mother appeared on the dock and shouted to them that supper was ready. She stood on the dock with her hands on her hips, tapping her foot, waiting to see them start to come in. Pete's Dad chuckled and said, "Well, that's all the fishing for today." as he reeled in his line and prepared to return.

Pete basked in the love of family and friends, but knew in his heart that an even greater love waited for him, missed him and needed him. God waited, and waited, and waited. Pete had to choose. Stay with family or go on to God.

After dinner Pete wandered out to the straight and narrow path, sat on a little bench and gazed longingly at the glow from Heaven shining over the next hill. Eventually all of his family would join him in Heaven, wouldn't they? As he struggled with the pain of choosing between staying with family and going on to God, a man wearing the traditional roman collar of a Catholic priest came along the straight and

narrow path. He smiled kindly at Pete as he passed. Pete called to him asking, "Please, Father. Can you help me?"

The priest sighed, looked longingly at the glow over the next hilltop. But he sat next to Pete on the bench and asked, "What can I do for you?"

Pete gathered his thoughts, and then said, "I love God. But I love my family too. I'm confused. Can you explain love? Not the marrying kind of love. Just love, like for God."

"Love!" the priest smiled, "I have tried to live it, but can I explain it?" He pulled on one ear as he twisted his head. "I'll try."

He thought silently for a minute, pulled on one ear again, and then began. "We human beings develop our ability to love from the potential God gives us all. You have heard that human beings are made in the image of God. Do you know what that means?"

"No, but I think I'm about to find out."

"Oh! You are a smart aleck, aren't you!" the priest chuckled.

Pete just grinned while the priest continued.

"Being made in the image of God has four parts:

being capable of self-knowledge,

being capable of self-possession,

being capable of freely giving ourselves and

being capable of giving and receiving mutual love.

These capabilities are capabilities of God. Life is an opportunity to develop these from potential to active capabilities. The more you develop these, the more able and willing you are to share God's life."

"I'm sorry. You've lost me completely." said Pete.

"OK. Let's take them one at a time.

"FIRST: being capable of self-knowledge.

"You have the ability to recognize that you are your own person, separate from everyone and everything else. You are beyond special. You are beyond rare. You are unique. From the beginning of time, to now, to the end of time; there never has been, is not, and never will be another person exactly like you; with exactly your genes, your experiences, your personality, your soul. Gaze at the stars at night some time. Think about the fact that in all the universe, you are unique. Contemplate the billions of years that the universe has existed. Yet, in all of time you are unique.

"SECOND: being capable of self-possession.

"An animal cannot control himself. He lives by instinct. We human beings however, being made in the image of God, can control ourselves. It's not always easy. We frequently need help from God. But we can control ourselves."

Pete asked, "Like when we choose to stop smoking cigarettes?"

"Yes! Or go to Mass when we don't feel like it. Or care for a sick relative when it's not convenient. When we make the hard, loving choices in our lives."

"THIRD: capable of freely giving ourselves.

"Think of the wonderful people who volunteer for the military out of love for our country. They knowingly risk their lives to keep us free. They are freely giving of themselves for the benefit of the rest of us. Think also of doctors and nurses who volunteer to help out after natural disasters. These are living images of God.

"FOURTH: capable of giving and receiving mutual love.

"To care for another and allow them to care for you is the highest form of love. The obvious example is in marriage. But mutual love is not limited to marriage. Family members and good friends often share mutual love. Most importantly, God loves you and wants to share a mutual love with you."

The priest concluded, "Does that make it clear how being made in the image of God means having the capacity to love?"

Pete slowly replied, "Give me a year to think it through and it probably will."

The priest smiled and said, "In the meantime, develop your ability to love by making real choices in the real world. Choice is where love is given or denied. Hard choices are huge opportunities for real, loving choices. Like the choice you face right now. Go on to God or stay with family. It is very hard. Will you go to God or make Him keep waiting? I for one am going on to God. Do you choose to come with me?"

Pete shook his head, "Thanks, but no. I appreciate your time. Thank you very much. You've been very helpful, but I'm not ready to go on just yet."

The priest gave him a hug and headed up over the hill.

Pete sat on the bench thinking for a long time. No one else came along to help him with his thoughts. Finally, a solution hit him.

"Hey!" Pete thought, "why not go together?"

Pete started talking up the idea among his family members. Who was ready to go on to God? Uncle George said he had tried, but it was too painful. Reunion with family was happiness enough for him. Pete's mother was determined to wait for Pete's sister.

Pete waited for another day of fishing to talk to his Dad.

"So, Dad," asked Pete, "Why are you still here? Why haven't you gone on to be with God in Heaven?"

His Dad answered simply, "I will not leave your mother."

"But isn't the whole point of Purgatory to choose God over everything and everyone else?" Pete asked.

"Well yes," his Dad replied. "However, understand, your mother knows God loves her in part because she has experienced my love. If I left her, she may well doubt my love for her, and therefore doubt God's love for her. It would not serve God well for me to cause that wonderful woman to doubt His love. So I wait. We will go on to Heaven when she is ready."

"Have you talked to her about it?" asked Pete.

"Yes," sighed his Dad, "She will not go on without Nancy."

Pete was nervous, but said, "I have to tell you Dad. More and more, I need to go be with God. It's getting even bigger than my desire to be with all of you."

"Good for you," replied his Dad. "You should go on then."

"But won't you and Mom come with?" Pete pleaded, "After all, Nancy can't get lost. Can't you make Mom stop waiting?"

"Make her?" his Dad smiled, "Let me explain. Spouses learn to give each other the gift of cooperation. My gift to her is that I do all I can of what she needs and much of what she wants. Her gift to me is that she does all she can of what I need and much of what I want. The gift of cooperation is a part of our mutual gift of love. We will go on to God when she is ready."

After a pause for bobber bobbing, Pete's Dad continued, "Maybe I shouldn't do this, but I'm going to make it easier for you. I'm going to suggest that you go on to Heaven and keep an eye out for your sister. If you see Nancy, come back and get us."

"Yes!" Pete cried, "That's perfect. Maybe I'll come back for you even if I haven't found her up ahead." Pete gave his Dad a hug, almost tipping the boat. And Pete began planning his departure.

Pete could not convince any friends or relatives to go on to God. Yet, Pete's desire to be with God kept growing and growing.

Finally, Pete started saying goodbye. His last goodbye was to his mother. That was when he knew he really did love God. Nothing less than love could have taken him from his mother's arms. Nothing less than love could have enabled her to let him go.

So with a mixture of feelings: the sadness of parting, joyous anticipation of being with God, and fear of the pain that might wait in between, Pete climbed the next hill.

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#### Chapter 9: Grief

Pete was all alone and lonely as he entered the last valley.

The glow over the far hill was very bright now. Pete knew he was close to joining God in Heaven. But as he entered the valley, Pete felt an overwhelming, numbing pain; not a physical pain, but a pain of the heart. He couldn't think straight. He could barely breathe. He lost all ambition, all sense of purpose. The pain increased as he advanced slowly through the valley. Finally, overwhelmed, he sat on a bench and wept.

When he looked up, he saw a woman approaching. She walked steadily, with purpose. The pain of the valley showed on her face, but she was undeterred. Seeing his state, she sat on the bench next to him and smiled. "Hi, my name is Rosie. Want to know what this is?" she asked.

Sniffing one last time, Pete said, "Yes. Please."

"I recognize this feeling" she said, "from when I buried my parents, my brothers and sisters, my son. This is grief: deep, heavy, soul crushing grief. As we get close to God, we feel His grief."

"Why would God ever grieve?" Pete asked, "Isn't He all powerful?"

"Well, yes. But even God is constrained by the limits of reality."

Pete wasn't buying this, "Why would God allow Himself to be in a painful situation?"

Rosie smiled, "The reality is God wants to share mutual love with His children. But true love is by its nature a gift, freely given and freely accepted, or it is nothing."

"OK", said Pete hesitantly, "But why such overwhelming grief in God's life?"

Rosie sighed, looked off toward the last hill and the glow of Heaven shining brightly over it. Then she looked directly at Pete and said; "Before I answer I will ask your opinion on something. If I told you that 99% of people eventually go to Heaven and only 1% go to Hell, would that be sufficiently optimistic for you?"

Pete smiled at that one. "Yes, saying 99% of us go to Heaven is plenty optimistic."

Rosie took a deep breath, then looked right in Pete's eyes and continued, "If you look it up, you will find that every day about 150,000 people die all around the world. Each and every one of them is a precious, beloved child of God. God deliberately, carefully created them. God watched them grow. He rejoiced at their triumphs; cried at



their sorrows. He loved each one and called each one to Himself. But God can only love each human being as actively as each human heart allows. Remember, God wants to share mutual, true love and to be true, love has to be a gift, freely given and freely accepted. Unfortunately not every person accepts the love God offers.

"Well then," Rosie continued, "if 1% go to Hell, then since every day about 150,000 people die, every day some 1,500 people go to Hell. God loves each and every one of those 1,500 lost souls with all His heart, with all His soul, with all His strength. God will grieve for all eternity for each and every human being lost to Him. His memories of them will always remain in His mind and in His heart. Yet He can never talk to them; never hold them; never comfort them because they will not let God actively love them. We are being optimistic in figuring God loses 1,500 children a day, whatever the real number is, each human being lost is an eternal torment of grieving in God's heart."

Pete was stunned. "I never thought of that. How sad for God." he mumbled.

"Well, think about this. You have the power to comfort God in His grief. Because you are a human being, you too are a precious, beloved child of God. Are you willing to endure sharing God's eternity of grief in order to give God the love and comfort that only you can give?"

"I want to" said Pete, "I really do. But, I don't know if I can endure any more of this kind of pain. How do I get over it?"

"Ah," Rosie sighed, " You don't get over grief. You get used to it. You change into someone who is able to be happy while still grieving. Learning to live with grief is not something you can learn from a book. It's something you learn by living it. When I buried my loved ones, the grief was terrible. And it never went away. But I became able to be happy while still grieving because the love and joy I shared with my family, and with God, was bigger than the grief.

"In this valley we are getting a taste of God's grief. The grief you feel here will NOT get any better. Even after the world ends, God's grief will continue. The memory of His beloved children who chose to go to Hell will live in God's heart forever.

"Only love and the joy it brings can overcome the sorrow of grief. You, being a beloved child of God can bring Him love and joy to overcome His sorrow of grief. So, I will ask you again, do you love God enough to share His grief, and thus comfort Him?"

Pete had always focused on how Pete being in Heaven would make Pete happy. For the first time, he realized that Pete being in Heaven would make God happy. A new joy was born in Pete at that moment as he realized his importance in the life of God.

"OK let's try." Pete replied slowly, "It's gotten worse with every step I took, but after all Jesus did for me, I will try."

And so Pete and Rosie stood and started slowly, but purposefully, across the valley. The joy of Heaven grew within Pete's chest as he approached the direct presence of his beloved creator with Faith, Hope and Love.

Faith convinced him he was already comforting God.

Hope filled his heart.

Love overcame his pain.

Pete walked eagerly, joyfully up and over the last hill.

The End

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