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Blessed Are the Wives



MIXED-FAITH MARRIAGE *and*
MY SEARCH *for* SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Blessed Are the Nones* by Stina Kielsmeier-Cook.
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InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.

THE FALLOUT

I was eavesdropping, of all things, when my husband's deconversion first hit me.

I was sitting on the floor of the guest bedroom in Josh's childhood home in North Carolina, straining to make out the voices filtering through the hallway—the steady, deep timbre of my father-in-law's voice and the more volatile ups and downs of my husband's as he explained that he no longer thought God was real. My father-in-law—who previously served for twenty years as a missionary in South America, who I had seen sharing the gospel with strangers in parking lots—was now trying to talk his son back into eternal life. I closed my eyes. This was really happening. My mother-in-law was out running errands, and I wondered how she would react when she heard about this conversation later—the same mother who, when I first met her, told me that Josh was set apart for God's purposes.

It was Advent—the four weeks before Christmas that mark the beginning of a new church year. Our then two-year-old daughter, Eliza, was asleep on the bed nearby. I got up and wandered out through the hallway, out of earshot of the argument

in the next room, and made my way to the living room where the Christmas tree glowed under the weight of cheerful twinkly lights. I hummed a few bars of the hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” then stopped.

Standing there near the Christmas tree, I remembered other trees: how, on a perfect spring day four years earlier, Josh and I had stood under maples and pledged to serve God and each other. Guests in attendance said that the clouds were doing funny things over our heads while we recited our vows. The wispy bits of cumulus were lengthening into long pillars, eventually forming the shape of a *v*. One guest said it was the Holy Spirit dove, descending over our little ceremony. It was a sign of God’s presence with us.

Now I prayed bitterly in my in-laws’ living room. *What was that, God? Was the Holy Spirit dove just wishful thinking? Were the wedding vows too? Was God really there when Josh and I made that marriage covenant? And what am I supposed to do now?*

My eyes went in and out of focus as I stared at the Christmas lights, considering how full of hope Josh and I had been when we first met ten years earlier.

The first time we held hands was in a prayer circle on a mission trip during spring break at our evangelical Christian college. When we started dating at age twenty, we talked about serving together overseas or doing missionary work together. We were “on fire” for Jesus. The world was abundant with possibilities, all in service to the God we both loved.

When we got pregnant unexpectedly after our first wedding anniversary, those dreams shifted. Josh was accepted to a fully

funded master's program in plant pathology, and I stayed home with our baby rather than work another nonprofit job that didn't cover the cost of childcare. My days were tethered to our baby daughter Eliza's sleep schedule, trips to the park or library, and appointments at the WIC office for vouchers that made groceries on Josh's graduate stipend affordable. My friends from college were medical residents or program managers or investment bankers, while I kept my household humming. Dishes. Vacuuming. Hanging cloth diapers on a line.

Attending church became the social highlight of my week—a chance to have conversations with adults and sing hymns and pray for the world. It was something our little family of three did together, even when I became a member of our tiny Mennonite congregation and Josh did not, saying he couldn't sign the statement of faith. Some Sundays I led worship while he sat in the pew, our daughter happily occupied in the nursery.

Maybe I should have realized that Josh was gradually losing his religion during our third year of marriage. To be sure, I knew he'd chosen not to join the church, but he still showed up by my side each Sunday. I chewed at my fingernails when he started reading the Dao De Jing, figuring it was just a phase of exploration. Nothing wrong with that. But I held on to the naive belief of the young that “everything is going to be okay.” Full stop. Wasn't that the gospel I was taught all those years in Sunday school, something about everything working out for the good of those who love God? Get married, have babies, and God will provide? I knew there might be hardships, such as illness or bounced checks (marriage is hard work! all the premarital books

told us). When I made my vows to Josh, I knew it wasn't going to be easy, but I expected to have a partner in faith and that we would turn to God together when faced with difficult times.

But that's not how this particular story goes.



It would be easy to make this story about my husband's faith crisis, but in fact my spiritual life started changing, too, in my midtwenties. I stopped reading my Bible, though I still packed it in my overnight bag whenever I left town. The *Book of Common Prayer* developed a permanent water ring on the front cover, functioning mostly as a coaster on my nightstand. My prayer life, once a raging river, petered into occasional drips. It wasn't that I stopped believing in God. The scandalous beauty of the incarnation, the upside-down kingdom, these things still captured my imagination. I still loved God, yet my spiritual disciplines fell away.

Was it apathy? Laziness? Cynicism? Probably. But many of my college friends were in similar places. For four years we had been immersed in an evangelical environment where spirituality was spoon-fed (and sometimes force-fed) to us every day. So much importance was placed on our individual piety, on our personal relationship with God, that it seemed inevitable we would experience a spiritual drop-off after graduating, as our small, protected pool was sucked into the big, wide ocean.

As time passed, I grew afraid of examining my own beliefs. I felt like author Kathleen Norris in *The Cloister Walk*, where she describes the contemplative life as plowing up the earth within

her heart. “As I take my spade in hand,” she writes, “as far as I can see, great clods of earth are waiting, heavy and dark, a hopeless task.”

Now, at age thirty-three, I am standing here, my spade in hand, assessing my own barren fields. I am afraid of digging into my own dark clods. I am worried about what I will find.



A few weeks before I overheard Josh’s conversation with his dad, I had a miscarriage. Together we stood at the front of the sanctuary of our tiny Mennonite Church and shared the news, my body slumping into his. Afterward, in the church basement, gray-haired women patted my arms, whispering their own stories of loss.

Not long after that Josh stopped coming to church altogether. But even with all my doubts and unexamined faith, I kept attending services week after week. The church was there for me when I white-knuckled my way through another pregnancy; women named Edie and Susan and Margaret brought us meals after our son Rowan was born.

In those early years after Josh’s deconversion, Sundays were the hardest day of the week. Josh helped when I searched for that mismatched sock or rushed to wipe mouths after breakfast. He made sure the diaper bag was stocked with wipes and slipped a few Kid-Z granola bars in the side pocket.

But when I would leave to walk to church with our two little kids, he loaded his mountain bike into the car instead. We kissed and said goodbye. I walked the kids out the front door and lifted

them into the double stroller; I buckled them into their seats and released the brake. On the walk to church it was often windy, and Rowan cried that the sun was in his eyes. I told him to just hold on a little while longer, that we'd be there soon. Eliza sang an off-key version of "Mary Had a Little Lamb," and I thought about that parable of the lost sheep, the one where Jesus leaves the ninety-nine behind in search of the one who has gone astray. I huffed and took deep sighs and put the hat back on the toddler who had just taken it off, and then I put it back on again.

We passed the children's hospital. Two nurses stood on the curb, smoking in matching salmon-colored scrubs. I caught a whiff of second-hand smoke as I kept pushing the heavy stroller that doesn't steer easily, sometimes veering off the sidewalk into brown grass.

Once we arrived at church, I eyed the long flight of stairs up to the sanctuary doors. Like so many buildings in this neighborhood, the church was old, had weathered many winters here, and wasn't designed for twenty-first-century families and all their stuff. I carried my kids one by one up the flight of stairs, readjusting mittens or tightening a boot that threatened to slip off, before pulling the stroller up the concrete steps behind me: thunk, thunk, thunk. We received our bulletin and a soft handshake from a kind-eyed greeter—the same woman who gave us a handmade baby quilt when Eliza was born. I guided my kids into a hard pew and dropped the diaper bag on the crimson cushion.

Eliza sat down, then stood up, then grabbed a hymnal and dropped it, while Rowan decided to lie down on the floor of the

sanctuary. I wished I had an extra set of arms, sprouting out of my body like a Hindu goddess, to hold my children close.

Instead I was scrambling and thinking of my husband who was climbing onto a bicycle in a cathedral of trees, his hands gripping handlebars, his body worshipping in wilderness rather than here in this dusty sanctuary. My nose twinged as I held their tiny hands while the pianist played the chords of the first hymn. I hoisted my son onto my hip and rested my cheek against his downy hair.

What am I still doing here? I wondered.

Shortly after Rowan was born, the interim pastor called and asked us about a baby dedication. We'd had Eliza dedicated back when my husband still believed in God. Hand in hand, we'd stood before this very congregation and vowed to raise her in the knowledge of God's vast love for her, that we would tell her the great, old stories of God's work in the history of God's people. Two of our best friends, Meredith and James, now Eliza's godparents, stood beside us just as they had as attendants in our wedding ceremony.

"I just can't do it this time," Josh had told me. "I can't stand in front of the church and pledge our kid to a God I don't believe in."

As I stood for the hymn, I felt the smooth strands of Rowan's hair against my cheek. I felt the heaviness of his body in my arms.



I met my Josh the fall of junior year at Wheaton College. I interviewed him for a school newspaper article because he was

coleading a campus-wide week of prayer and fasting to raise awareness and funds for the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. We met in the Stupe, the campus café where students studied and gossiped and held Bible studies. With my borrowed tape recorder rolling, I listened to Josh talk about his simple desire to just *do something* in the face of so much suffering in the world. And what was more powerful than prayer?

I asked my questions and looked into Josh's blue eyes and saw that he was like me, a sincere believer who saw Jesus as the champion of the poor. He was as serious about living his faith as I was. I listened to his desire for change, to his hope for God's justice, and I knew. I knew I wanted to forever bind my life to someone like him, someone who wouldn't settle for an apathetic, ordinary life. We would live in radical contrast to the way most American Christians stumble through their days. And his faith, so blazing and earnest, would bolster and carry mine.

It wasn't long before we were seniors, sitting together on a blanket with our fingers entwined under the flowering magnolia trees on Blanchard lawn. The blossoms were impossibly cheerful; the smell of earth and worms and cut grass was in the air. Classmates strolled past in the way only college students in the springtime can when finals are still weeks away, full of carefree jabber and flirtation, the girls in swishy skirts and sleeveless tops sidling up to the boys in cargo shorts and flip-flops. Two guys tossed a Frisbee back and forth. The sound of guitar music wafted over from another cluster of students lounging on the grass.

We were on our own blanket island, reading the Bible together and pretending to be unaware of people walking by.

“I am the vine; you are the branches,” Josh read, pulling his hand away to turn the onionskin page of his Bible. “If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

The spiky grass pricked my bare legs as I reached over to re-grasp his hand. He handed me the worn Bible, and I continued reading: “If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.”

We stared up at those dancing blossoms, inhaled spring’s scent, dazed by newfound love and our mutual desire to produce good fruit for God. Later that week we attended the three-hour Easter vigil at the Anglican church we attended, standing on our chairs, ringing bells, and shouting hallelujahs when the priest announced: “He is risen!” Rebirth was all around us; resurrection reigned. It felt like a guarantee.

All around us we watched our classmates pair off and give one another a “ring by spring.” Jokes abounded about young women pursuing their “MRS degree.” Many of these campus sayings were caricatures; my girlfriends in college were ambitious and smart and deeply committed to their faith, not boy-crazy husband hunters. But many of us *did* hope we’d meet our marriage partners in college or soon thereafter—that we could ring the engagement bell (yes, that’s a real tradition at my alma mater) to announce we had found ourselves a Christian spouse. We longed for that mythical godly partner we had learned about in high school youth group, our very own Jim Elliot to our Elisabeth, a Billy Graham to our Ruth.

It's no wonder that, in the jumble of messages I received on Christian marriage, I thought my relationship with God would be amplified by my spouse. When Josh and I fell in love, our shared belief in God was the deepest part of our connection. And I assumed that God would look upon us as a joint spiritual package—that my spiritual fortunes depended in some way on my husband's Christian walk.

If you're not aligned spiritually, then nothing will match up—or so the Christian marriage messaging goes.

When Josh stopped believing in God, I didn't know our mixed-faith marriage was hardly an anomaly. Millions of other married people are doing the hard work of reevaluating their unions after a faith change. A 2015 report from Pew Research showed that more and more marriages are between people of different religious beliefs and that “most generational cohorts actually are becoming less religiously affiliated as they age.” The rise of the religious nones suggests that young adults are experiencing faith changes or even abandoning Christianity more now than ever before—which is often a sucker punch for those left in their wake. New conflicts arise as married couples navigate how to spend Sunday mornings, what to teach their children about religion, and how to spend the holidays.

For Christians like me who are married to nonbelievers, finding new models for living a faithful Christian life is often an exercise in frustration. Most churches have married people attending services, yet those who come as singles are often on the sidelines of the community—an experience that unmarried people in the church have long lamented. Add to that the

depressing divorce statistics of interfaith marriages (among the highest rates being between evangelicals and religious nones), and the future seems bleak, indeed.

What am I supposed to do now? is the question I asked God the night Josh told his father he wasn't a Christian anymore, and it's the question I've been asking every day since. After so much time in Protestant churches that center on the traditional Christian family, I don't want a self-help guide on how to pray my husband back to faith. Instead, I need hope that my interfaith marriage isn't an affliction I need to bear but a vehicle through which God can move.

God did eventually answer my question, though not in the way I expected. It wasn't by bringing Josh back into the fold (though I still believe in the parable of the lost sheep) but by giving me a place where women don't rely on husbands for their spiritual identities.

God answered my question by giving me a bunch of nuns.

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