

# The Jerome Conspiracy



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Second Edition

The Universal Hope Edition

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iUniverse, Inc.  
New York Bloomington

**The Jerome Conspiracy**  
**Second Edition**  
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iUniverse  
1663 Liberty Drive  
Bloomington, IN 47403  
[www.iuniverse.com](http://www.iuniverse.com)  
1-800-Authors (1-800-288-4677)

ISBN: 978-1-4401-0015-4 (pbk)  
ISBN: 978-1-4401-0016-1 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

# Acknowledgments

To Osvaldo Jerez and Esteban Serrano who have laboriously critiqued more than three dozen versions of this manuscript word for word.

To David Compton who meticulously styled my words into much better prose.



# Chapter One

1952—Vatican City, Rome

“Enter,” the cardinal commanded, responding to a knock on his office door.

An elderly bishop walked in, knelt down, and kissed the cardinal’s ring before he began to speak. “You told me to inform you if any of the scrolls we discovered could be of concern to the Church.”

“Yes?” the cardinal responded, rapidly drumming his fingers on the desk.

The bishop gulped. “I’m troubled about some of the scrolls found in cave number four.”

The cardinal leaned forward.

The bishop’s voice started shaking. “These scrolls reveal something quite disturbing.” He handed the cardinal a written summary of his discovery.

The cardinal read the report and grimaced. “Have you shared your findings with anyone else?”

“No, Your Grace ... I wanted you to be the first to know, just as you ordered.”

The cardinal leaned back. “If these scrolls are made public, someone else might put the same pieces together. And we cannot allow that to happen. You must never discuss your findings with anyone, even other members of the cloth. Simply tell the others that I have ordered for all the scrolls found in cave four to be kept secret indefinitely. And leave it at that. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the bishop replied. Then he promptly turned around and exited the room.

## Chapter Two

Present Day—San Francisco, California

“Turn left at the next light,” Peter told Jamie. “Let’s take the highway home.”

Jamie glanced at the clock on the dashboard. “I can’t believe its three o’clock in the morning. We haven’t been out this late in ages.”

“The music was amazing.”

“Yeah,” Jamie said with a smile as he turned to look at Peter.

“And the—”

\* \* \* \* \*

Peter opened his eyes. Everything looked fuzzy. It took a moment for his eyes to focus, and when they did he saw a young nurse standing next to him. “What happened?”

“You’ve been in a very bad car accident,” the woman replied. “Try to get some rest now.”

Peter’s mind rushed to Jamie. “Jamie! Where’s Jamie?”

“The doctor will be here shortly. He’ll tell you everything. Just try to relax.”

“I need to see Jamie,” Peter insisted. “Where is he?”

A frown crossed the nurse’s face. “Let me see what I can do.”

\* \* \* \* \*

At three-thirty in the morning, everything was quiet in the Webber household. Samantha, a middle-aged housewife, was sleeping comfortably next to her husband, Jonathon. Beside the bed lay a worn Bible that Samantha and Jonathon—a devout evangelical Christian couple—often read together before retiring to sleep.

Acceptance of the Bible as God’s inerrant, literal truth was the foundation of the couple’s life. Every week they faithfully attended four church services: Sunday school, Sunday morning service, Sunday evening service, and Wednesday night prayer. And once every quarter, they attended seven straight days of evening revival services. When they listened to the

radio, they often tuned to a Christian station. And their reading material was also generally limited to Christian topics presented from an evangelical perspective.

Samantha and Jonathon were both awakened by the ringing telephone. “Who in the world would call us at this time of the night?” Samantha wondered as her husband answered the phone.

When she saw the color drain from her husband’s face, Samantha felt a tight knot in the pit of her stomach. “What is it? Is it Jamie?”

Jonathon choked on his words as he spoke into the phone. “I appreciate you calling us so quickly. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

Jonathon hung up.

Samantha stared at her husband, waiting for him to respond.

As tears welled up in Jonathon’s eyes, he reached for his wife’s hand. “That was Holy Cross Hospital. Jamie’s been in a bad accident, and the doctor doesn’t believe he has much time left. We need to take the next flight to San Francisco.”

At that moment, Samantha envisioned Jamie’s soul writhing in a sweltering lake of fire. And she heard him uttering blood curdling shrieks as the flames persistently burned his soul from every direction.

Samantha was terror stricken at the thought of her only child spending eternity imprisoned in the fires of hell. She stopped breathing for a moment. But then a sudden surge of strength and determination overcame her. One thought began to consume her mind: she *must* make sure her son would be saved from that horrible fate.

Getting dressed, making reservations, driving to the airport, waiting for the flight—it was all one big blur. On the plane, Samantha began to reminisce over the miraculous way Jamie had entered the world.

The Webbers had been trying to get pregnant for more than three years. One day after church, they made a comment to their pastor about their frustrating attempts. That week, during Wednesday night prayer, Pastor Rick had asked them to stand before the congregation. After the pastor explained their problem, the members of the church came forward and laid their hands on the couple as they compassionately prayed to God on their behalf.

Samantha remembered how, two months after that, she realized she hadn’t had her regular period. Secretly—not wanting to get Jonathon’s hopes up—she went for a pregnancy test. It was a miracle: the result came back positive. The Webbers had always considered Jamie their priceless gift from God.

But there were other memories of Jamie, some not as pleasant. Samantha couldn’t help recalling what had been, until now, the worst day of her life.

One summer afternoon, when Jamie was home during college break, Samantha entered his room to ask him if he had something to tell her about

his relationship with David, a neighborhood guy about Jamie's own age. Jamie looked startled, then afraid. Samantha assured him she would always love him no matter what. And that was when—after much squirming and shifting in his chair—Jamie blurted out those horrible words: “Mom, I’m gay.” When Samantha heard those words, she became physically sick to her stomach.

Samantha was jolted from her recollection when a flight attendant announced it was time to prepare for landing. She held firmly to her resolve. “Jonathon, we need to ask Jamie if he’s accepted Jesus as his personal savior the moment we arrive. I can’t even imagine how I could survive if our only child ends up spending eternity in hell.”

The frown on Jonathon’s face deepened. “Honey, in all the confusion I forgot to tell you Jamie’s unconscious. The doctor doesn’t think he’ll regain consciousness. Whatever you have to say to him, we’ll just have to hope he’ll hear it on some level.”

Samantha wrapped her arms defiantly around herself. “No. I can’t accept this. Jonathon, how did the doctor know to call our house? Was Jamie conscious when he arrived at the hospital?”

Jonathon squeezed his wife’s hand. “No, sweetheart. Jamie had a medical alert card in his wallet. He listed you as the person to contact in a medical emergency.”

Samantha’s shoulders began to sag, and she hung her head. She began to pray. “God, wake my baby up when I’m there. *I trust you with the salvation of my son’s soul.*”

An incredible wave of peace came over her. In her heart of hearts, she knew she was going to see her boy on the other side.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Samantha and Jonathon arrived at the hospital, the attendant informed them that only one visitor was permitted in the intensive care unit at a time.

Jonathon gently placed his hand on his wife’s shoulder. “You go first.”

Jamie was still unconscious when Samantha arrived. There were machines attached to him from head to toe. She brushed back the light brown hair from his forehead to give him a kiss. “Jamie,” she whispered into his ear. “It’s me. Mom.”

Samantha could swear her son’s eyelids flickered. “Honey, if you can hear me, I need you to show me somehow that you have accepted Jesus. Jamie, please let me know somehow that you have accepted Jesus.”

Jamie opened his eyes.

Goosebumps danced on Samantha's arms. She was sure this was the answer to her prayers.

"Mom," Jamie said weakly.

Samantha pressed. "Honey, I'm so afraid time may be running out. Please let me know. Have you accepted Jesus?"

Jamie smiled. "No, Mom. I don't believe in all that religious stuff. I've never believed in it. You know that."

"Honey, I'm begging you," she pleaded. "Surrender to God right now. I can't bear the thought of your soul suffering forever in hell. Please, Jamie, this is serious."

Jamie's words faltered, but he remained calm and relaxed. "Mom ... if God exists, I'm sure he must be the way Peter says. He'd have to be the most loving, wonderful being. Mom ... I'm not afraid."

And with that, Jamie closed his eyes.

Samantha gripped the bedrails tightly. "Jamie, now isn't the time to be stubborn. The reality is that the eternal fate of your soul depends on what—" She was interrupted by loud beeps from the machines attached to her son's body.

## Chapter Three

Within seconds the head nurse rushed into the room. “Mrs. Webber, please go to the waiting area.”

Samantha didn’t budge. “No. I’m staying here with Jamie.”

The nurse glared at her. “Mrs. Webber, you must let us tend to him!”

Samantha stood and moved about three feet from the bed. “I’ll step out of the way, but I’m not leaving my boy.”

The nurse walked toward her. “Mrs. Webber, I didn’t want to be the one to tell you, but Jamie’s gone.”

In shock, Samantha stammered, “No, that isn’t possible. God hasn’t saved him yet. Jamie can’t be ...” Samantha became too numb to speak. Her only child had died without accepting Jesus into his heart. She was now certain she would never see her boy in heaven. And even worse, she knew his soul was going to be cast into the everlasting lake of fire when Jesus returned to the earth. The death, the damnation. It was too much for an evangelical Christian mother to bear.

Samantha broke down and cried.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Samantha entered the intensive care unit, Jonathon made his way to the visitor’s waiting area. A distinguished-looking gentleman seated next to him noticed the troubled look on his face.

“Are you okay?” the man asked.

“My son Jamie was in a car accident,” Jonathon said. “The doctor doesn’t think my boy has much time left. And I’m so afraid that he hasn’t committed his life to Christ, and it’s his roommate’s fault. Peter’s convinced my son that everyone will eventually go to heaven. He’s convinced Jamie there is no hell.”

“So Peter believes the same thing that the original Christians believed,” the stranger said nonchalantly.

Jonathon thought he must have misunderstood the stranger’s comment. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I’m a history professor at SU. I often lecture on religious history. One of the things I teach my students is that the first Christians believed every

human soul will eventually be reconciled to God. The original Christians taught that when Jesus returns, the souls of unbelievers will be temporarily sent to a place called Gehenna for purification while believers get to enjoy a special reward for having lived righteously.”

Jonathon was incredulous. “So that’s what you teach at your secular institution? I can’t imagine how many of your students will lose their eternal souls because of the deceitful lies you teach at your college.”

“I don’t make judgment calls about theological matters in my lectures. I just teach history,” the professor responded matter-of-factly. “Personally, I don’t have any religious beliefs—Christian or otherwise. And I’m concerned that your beliefs will cause you a lot of unnecessary suffering if things don’t work out the way you want with your son.”

The professor reached into his pocket, pulled out a business card, and placed it in Jonathon’s hand. “I hope everything works out for you and your family. But if you need someone to talk to, feel free to give me a call.”

Jonathon was indignant. He knew the professor’s humanistic teachings were responsible for damning legions of souls to hell. He was just about to shove the card back into the professor’s hand when he saw Samantha stumbling toward him, looking dazed. Without saying another word, he leaped from his chair, instinctively put the card in his pocket, and rushed toward her.

“Can I go see Jamie now?” Jonathon asked. But when Samantha started sobbing, he knew his son was gone. “Honey, did you get a chance to talk to him?” Jonathon could barely choke out the words.

Samantha nodded, sobbing too hard to speak.

“Did Jamie ask Jesus to come into his heart?”

With that question, Samantha collapsed into her husband’s arms. As Jonathon began to realize he was never going to see his son in heaven, a river of tears started flowing from his eyes. “Let me go say good-bye to Jamie. Then we’ll go home.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Peter had been waiting for information about Jamie for more than ten hours. When a different nurse entered his room, he barked, “I want to know what’s going on with Jamie!”

The nurse looked straight at Peter and calmly replied, “I don’t know any other way to tell you this than to just say it. Jamie died about half an hour ago. I’m so sorry you lost your friend.”

At first, Peter couldn't organize his thoughts. "Half an hour ago! Why didn't anyone take me to see him! I've been asking for him since early this morning!"

The nurse replied, "Jamie was taken straight to the intensive care unit when he arrived. He was in critical condition. Only family members are allowed in the ICU."

The nurse's comment about family brought Jamie's parents to Peter's mind. "It's so sad that Jamie's parents didn't get a chance to say good-bye to him."

"Jamie's parents made it in time," the nurse replied. "And I've heard that his mother even got to talk to him briefly before he died."

Peter thought a moment, then said, "Would you make sure the Webbers know my room number?"

"I'm sorry; the Webbers have already left the hospital."

Peter turned his face away from the nurse, and she left.

Peter realized how truly alone he was now. Jamie was gone. And even though he had gone to the Webbers' home every holiday, he knew that Jamie's parents wouldn't come to visit him in the hospital. He also knew his own parents wouldn't be coming. They disowned him the day he told them he was gay.

Peter kept thinking over and over again, "I wish I were the one who died."

\* \* \* \* \*

Samantha was too depressed to get out of bed on Sunday morning. Going to church was out of the question. She turned to her husband. "I'm going to stay home today. Why don't you go to church without me?"

Jonathon wrapped his arms around her. "Sweetheart, I'm not going to leave you alone."

"Jonathon, I insist. I need some time alone to think and pray." Actually, Samantha was dreading the time she was going to be alone, but she felt Jonathon needed the encouragement of his church friends.

"Are you sure?" Jonathon asked.

Samantha nodded.

Jonathon stroked his chin for a moment. "Maybe I could just go for the sermon, so I don't have to leave you alone too long."

"Please, honey. Go to adult Sunday school this morning. Say hi to Mark and Grace for me while you're there."

Jonathon got out of bed. "Okay. But I won't take time talking after the service. And I'll pick up something for us to eat on the way home."

\* \* \* \* \*

As Jonathon walked into the church foyer, Pastor Rick came straight at him and said, "I'm so glad you made it this morning. I have been praying for you and Samantha."

Jonathon forced a smile. "Thank you. We appreciate your prayers."

"And I will continue praying," the pastor assured him. Then the pastor's voice took on a deliberate tone. "And Jonathon, I couldn't stop thinking about the conversation you told me you had with that humanistic college professor. Perhaps God put the two of you together to make something good come out of this tragic situation."

The pastor's comment surprised Jonathon. "How can anything good come out of me losing my unsaved son? I am living my worst nightmare."

The pastor touched Jonathon's arm. "I know your son's eternal destiny was most important to you. But to God, everyone's soul is equally important. And maybe he put you and the professor together so you can help prevent others from ending up just like Jamie."

Jonathon shrugged his shoulders. "I'm really not following you, Pastor."

The pastor explained, "Well, we Christians have succeeded in changing the curriculums taught in many high schools. We have gotten the teaching of creationism placed side-by-side with the damnable theory of evolution. Perhaps God wants to use you to change the humanistic curriculum taught at that professor's university. If you can stop them from spreading lies, from blinding students to the truth, who knows how many souls you can bring to Christ?"

Jonathon pondered the pastor's words as he made his way to the adult Sunday school room.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Sunday school teacher began, "This month is Church History Month. Today we're going to discuss the history behind the most fundamental Christian doctrine: the Trinity – the doctrine that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are co-equal and co-eternal."

Jonathon, a highly successful engineering professional, was usually uninterested in history. "This is going to be boring," he thought. "Why does today have to be about history?"

The teacher continued, "The doctrine of the Trinity was developed in the fourth century by Gregory of Nyssa, when there were two distinct divisions in Christianity: the Latin churches of the West, and the Greek-

speaking churches of the East. Gregory was so revered, so respected, that he was canonized as a saint in both the Western and Eastern churches.”

It was as if a bolt of lightning struck Jonathon. “That’s it!” he exclaimed to himself. “I know how I can show that professor he’s wrong!” Jonathon was inspired to make it his mission to change the university’s curriculum.

It struck Jonathon that, at the start of Christianity, there may have been a few Christians who denied the reality of eternal punishment in hell. And the professor was probably exaggerating the number of such fringe believers in his claim that the original Christians believed all human souls will be reunited with God.

So Jonathon began formulating a plan. He decided to show the professor irrefutable documentation that mainstream, orthodox Christian founders, such as Gregory of Nyssa, taught that sinners would burn in hell forever. He reasoned that even the professor would have to agree that it didn’t matter what fringe, unorthodox people believed.

Jonathon pulled out a pen and started making notes about Gregory.

The teacher continued her lesson. “In AD 381 all the major churches of the East and the West got together in Constantinople to develop a unified statement of faith, called the Nicene Creed. Gregory’s Trinitarian formula was added to the Nicene Creed at this Second Ecumenical Council—a council in which Gregory played a prominent role. The Constantinople version of the Nicene Creed continues to shape Christianity to this very day, as it remains in use by Roman Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Assyrian, Anglican, Lutheran, and most other mainline Protestant denominations.”

“This really is the answer!” Jonathon thought. “Gregory is the key. He was the one who developed the doctrine of the Trinity, and he helped develop the very creed upon which orthodox Christianity is based. After I document that he and other eminent founders believed in the eternal fires of hell, the professor will have to reconsider what he teaches.”

Jonathon walked out of the classroom confident with his new plan.

\* \* \* \* \*

After Sunday school, Jonathon caught Pastor Rick in the foyer. He told the pastor that he had decided to accept the challenge. And then he shared his plan of attack.

Pastor Rick smiled. “I’m glad to hear you are going to follow through on my suggestion. And I particularly like your approach. In fact, a friend of mine is a professor of Christian history at seminary. I can arrange for the two of you to talk this week. I’m sure he’ll be able to give you all the

information you need to successfully rebut the professor. I think you have a great idea.”

“If I can make anything good come out of Jamie’s death, I’ll do it,” Jonathon told him.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Jonathon headed in the direction of the sanctuary, he was intercepted by Mark and Grace. Mark was Jonathon’s closest friend, and Grace was Samantha’s.

“Hi, Jonathon. Listen, are you and Samantha up for some company yet?” Mark asked.

Jonathon smiled, reflecting on their relationship. The two couples had visited together two or three times every week since the Webbers had moved to San Diego thirty years ago. Their relationship was cemented by their mutual commitment to living life based on the principles of the Bible, which both couples considered to be the only source of truth. They firmly believed that each and every word was supernaturally inspired by God himself.

Turning to Grace, Jonathon said, “I think Samantha really needs your help. She spends most of her time in bed, crying. I don’t know what I can do to help her. Maybe she’ll reach out to you.”

Grace grabbed her husband’s hand as she told Jonathon, “I’m sure Mark won’t mind if I take some time off work so I could visit Samantha as often as she wants.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Mark said. “Why don’t we bring some dinner over on Tuesday, and you can make some plans with Samantha?”

“That would be great,” Jonathon said. “Look, I’m going to skip the morning service and head on home. I’m concerned about Samantha being there alone. See you on Tuesday.”

On the drive home, Jonathon became excited about documenting what prominent Christian founders like Saint Gregory taught about the fate of sinners. He was sure this would put the liberal professor in his place.

But Jonathon’s excitement quickly turned to sadness as he thought about his own son. Overcome with grief, he pulled over to the side of the road. Clenching his eyes shut, he said aloud, “Jamie, I love you so much. You cannot even begin to know the pain I feel when I picture you suffering in the fires of hell.”

Tears welled up in his eyes. “I just wish to God that you could be purified from your sins, even after death. But no amount of false hope is going to alter the fate of your soul. And I cannot idly stand by and let this

professor teach a lie that could send other men and women to the same horrid fate as you.”

With his jaw clenched, Jonathon regained his composure and drove the rest of the way home.

## Chapter Four

Peter was released from the hospital Sunday afternoon. A stack of mail, mostly bills, awaited him. It wasn't until he opened the mortgage bill that it dawned on him that the house was in Jamie's name. In his grief, he hadn't considered the new economic reality he now found himself in.

Peter was a struggling artist. After Jamie made partner at the law firm three years ago, Peter quit his job to focus on his painting career—a career well suited for his highly emotional, manic-depressive personality. So far, he hadn't sold a single painting. Now he found himself jobless, penniless, homeless, and alone—dealing with the loss of his best friend and life partner.

Unable to look at the bills any longer, he bundled them up and threw them into a drawer. He walked over to the liquor cabinet, grabbed the scotch, and began to drink—straight from the bottle. Before he could empty it, he passed out cold on the couch.

Peter awoke in the evening with a massive, pounding headache. With his body and mind trashed, he felt even more alone and more depressed. Using his last ounce of willpower, he stood up, splashed water on his face, and headed for Stardust, a local bar.

Peter had struggled with addiction to alcohol long before he met Jamie. Jamie's influence had kept him on the straight and narrow. But with the agony of Jamie's death, he was more desperate than ever to numb himself.

"Give me an Absolut straight up," Peter yelled to the bartender. "A double." He downed the drink, but it didn't do the trick. "You got anything stronger?"

"That's Chuck's job," the bartender half-joked, making a reference to the dealer who supplied drugs to the club's patrons.

"Did I hear my name?" asked a fashionably dressed guy as he leaned on the bar next to Peter.

"You Chuck?" Peter inquired.

"Yep."

"What do you got?"

Chuck hesitated. He had never seen Peter before. After taking a moment to size him up, he asked, "How much do you have on you?"

"About fifty bucks."

Chuck motioned for Peter to follow him as he headed to the restroom.

Chuck entered a toilet stall, leaving the door open. "Come here."

Peter joined Chuck inside.

Chuck closed the stall door. He took Peter's money and pulled out a small plastic bag filled with crystal powder.

"What is it?"

Chuck rolled his eyes. "It's crystal, man!" He lowered his voice, "You know ... meth."

"What do I do with it?" Peter asked.

"You can take a key, scoop a little out, and snort it. But if you want to feel really good, you've got to smoke it."

"Thanks," Peter said as he left the stall with the plastic bag deep in his pocket.

After a couple more shots, he went home. Peter found out from the Internet how to prepare the drug for smoking, then, putting what he had learned into practice, he was gone to the world.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonathon awoke to the ringing alarm clock. "Samantha, honey, today's Tuesday. Remember, Mark and Grace are coming over tonight."

Samantha had spent the week crying, confined to the bedroom. "Okay. I'll straighten up the house," she said in a monotone.

"Don't worry, honey. I've been keeping the house shipshape. You can keep resting. You just have to get yourself ready by six o'clock this evening."

Jonathon kissed his wife on the forehead and then rose to prepare for work. As he rose, his cell phone rang.

"Hello, I'm Frank Wright ... from seminary," a voice announced. "Is this Jonathon Webber?"

Jonathon smiled. The pastor's friend had responded quickly. "Yes, and thanks for calling. I've been eager to talk to you."

"What can I do to help you, Jonathon?"

"Well, did Pastor Rick explain my project to you?"

"Not really," Frank replied. "He just told me you needed help finding historical references to refute a misleading liberal class being taught at a university. I'm always ready to help fight the liberal agenda."

Jonathon was relieved to have such a willing ally. "Terrific. What I need is a list of historical documents that contain quotes from the earliest

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Christian leaders, quotes showing they taught that sinners are punished in hell for all eternity.”

“Ah. That’ll be easy,” Frank said. “That teaching is very well documented, right from the beginning of Christianity onward.”

Jonathon grinned relieved to know it would be so easy to show the professor that he was wrong. He pulled out the notes he made from Sunday school and found the name he wrote of the prominent church father who developed the doctrine of the Trinity and helped create the foundational Christian creed. Then he said, “I’d specifically like documentation from the most influential church founders, such as Gregory of Nyssa.”

“Are you playing with me, Jonathon?” Frank asked.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t give you any references specifically from Gregory of Nyssa.”

“Why not?”

Frank hesitated. “Well, Gregory believed that all of humanity will spend eternity as God’s friends.”

Jonathon was stunned. “I’m confused. Was this a personal belief, or something he taught publicly?”

“Gregory wrote about this idea in many essays,” Frank replied. “He also spoke about it regularly in his homilies. It’s something he taught openly and often.”

Jonathon raked his fingers through his hair. “I have to say I’m very surprised about all of this.”

Frank continued. “You have to realize that at this time in history, many Christian churches believed the heresy of universal salvation—the idea that every soul will be reconciled to God. In fact, only one theological school taught the truth, the one in Rome. All the other Christian theological schools—Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea, Edessa, and Ephesus—taught that sinners will be punished for a limited amount of time.”

Jonathon felt let down. “But you said you can give me a list of leaders, starting from the beginning of Christianity, who taught that sinners will burn in hell forever.”

“Oh, yes,” Frank confirmed. “And if you want quotes from the fourth century, the time of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, I’d be glad to give you quotes from leaders affiliated with the Roman church.”

Jonathon was completely thrown. “But that doesn’t help me at all. I was trying to come up with information to refute the professor’s claim that the original Christians believed everyone will get to heaven. But you’re telling me the majority of the early orthodox theological schools actually did teach that.”

“Jonathon, there was so much going on during that time in history. And I’m afraid I’m confusing you more than helping you. Maybe the best approach would be for the secular professor to speak directly with me.”

“Are you sure that won’t be too much trouble?” Jonathon asked as some of the tension began to drain from his body.

Frank assured him. “Your pastor and I were close friends at seminary. He knows how much I enjoy putting liberal academics in their place. I’m sure that’s why he referred you to me. And Jonathon, I have to say, I almost always win.”

Jonathon considered the offer for a moment and then replied. “Well, I promised God that I’d give this project 100 percent, and you seem really confident. And the professor did ask me to call him. I’ll see if I can set something up. I have to go now. I’m already late for a meeting.”

Jonathon hurriedly got ready for work and headed off to his office.

While he was driving, his confidence started flip-flopping. “I was sure that the professor was crazy to say the early Christians believed every soul would make it to heaven,” he thought. “But it looks like he was right ... No, he can’t be right; otherwise everyone would already have heard about this before ... Yet there has to be a reason why Saint Gregory, one of the greatest Christian thinkers, believed everyone would be reconciled with God. There must be a reason why five out of six theological schools taught it as well ... But, then again, Frank seemed certain of what he was talking about. After all, he is the expert.”

Jonathon stepped out of his car and, dismissing his thoughts, rushed to his meeting.

## Chapter Five

Mark and Grace came over that evening as planned. After dinner, Mark and Jonathon headed for the living room while their wives cleaned up in the kitchen.

Jonathon eagerly explained his new mission to Mark. After he finished describing his conversation with Frank, he said, "I have to admit I was surprised. I've always assumed that the founding church fathers believed the same things that we do in our church. But even though I'm a little confused right now, Frank seemed very confident. I'm sure I must be missing something ... something that will become clear after I get the two professors to talk directly with each other."

Mark nodded. "It would be fun to be a fly on the wall during that debate! I'd love to watch Frank run circles around that university professor. Make sure you call me after it's over so you can give me a blow-by-blow description."

Jonathon chuckled. "You can count on it."

\* \* \* \* \*

In the kitchen, Samantha burst into tears. "Every time I see the urn containing Jamie's ashes, I'm reminded of his death and his condemnation. Whenever I see it, it's torture."

"I'm sorry for asking this," Grace said softly. "But why did you decide to have him cremated if you knew it was going to cause you so much anguish?"

"I did it to honor Jamie's wishes. He always said if anything happened to him, he didn't want a burial or a funeral. He wanted a private cremation with no one mourning over him."

"I see," was all Grace could say.

Samantha trembled. "Why did God answer our prayers for a son when he knew our child would end up in hell? God knew Jamie's destiny before he was born, yet he gave him to us anyway?"

Grace gently placed her hand on Samantha's trembling shoulder.

Samantha continued, "It would have been better if my son had never been born at all."

Grace remained silent.

With tears streaming down her face, Samantha moaned, "I hate to say it, but I think I may need to see a doctor for my depression. I feel like there's a dark cloud hanging over me all the time."

Grace pointed her finger at Samantha. "Bite your tongue! You don't need to see a shrink who'll just put you on medication and turn you into a zombie. You just need to have greater faith in Jesus. You need to trust the Holy Spirit to give you the comfort and strength you need to go through this."

Samantha's cheeks reddened. "I know you're right, but I feel like I'm failing God. Sometimes, in the mornings, I wish I wouldn't ever have to wake up again."

"Then I'll pray even harder for you to experience the comfort of the Holy Spirit," Grace said. "I'll also ask God to guide me on how I can help you. And remember, I'm always here for you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Peter hadn't slept since smoking the crystal meth three evenings ago. He promised himself that using the drug was going to be a one-time experience. There was no way he would ever allow himself to feel this lousy again.

Although Peter knew he should focus on looking for a job and a new place to live, he was simply too exhausted. So he dragged himself to the bedroom, laid down, and fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

That same morning, Jonathon found the card the professor had given him at the hospital. "DONALD RICHMOND, PhD," the card read.

"A liberal PhD, no wonder the professor's messed up," Jonathon said to himself as he dialed the number on the card.

"I don't know if you remember me; we met at Holy Cross Hospital," Jonathon said by way of introduction. The memory of that day so overwhelmed him that he started stuttering. "M-my unsaved son ... died in a car accident that day."

"Yes, I remember. Jonathon, right?"

"Yes. I ..." Jonathon stammered. "You asked me to contact you if I wanted to discuss my religious beliefs."

"I remember," Dr. Richmond replied. "What's on your mind?"

Jonathon explained. "At the hospital, you made a comment that the original Christians believed every human soul would inherit eternal life with God. I talked to a Christian history professor about your statement,

and I got a little confused by his response. He thought it would be helpful for me if you guys thrash through your differences on a three-way conference call so I can learn from your exchange.”

The professor hesitated. “So he wants to debate me, huh?”

“Well, I don’t know if you’d call it a debate. Maybe a vigorous discussion would be a better way to put it.”

“Jonathon, I’m glad you called. But although I want to help, I really don’t want to debate a narrow-minded, highly indoctrinated, religious conservative, so-called educator.”

Jonathon thought, “Look who’s talking—a narrow-minded, totally brainwashed, atheistic liberal so-called doctor.” Not wanting to be argumentative, he simply kept quiet.

The professor continued. “I’m sorry, Jonathon, but I’m going to have to turn down your offer. How are you and your wife doing?”

Jonathon sighed, feeling deflated. “I keep myself as busy as possible to avoid thinking about everything. But my wife, Samantha, is terribly depressed. I’m very concerned about her. She’s hardly left the bedroom since we got home from San Francisco. She blames herself for our son’s rejection of Christ. She believes he’s in hell because she didn’t do enough.”

Professor Richmond paused. “I’m so sorry to hear that ... Jonathon, I’d be glad to do anything I can to help you and your wife heal. And if talking to your friend will help, then I’m willing to do that for you. Why don’t you see about setting up that teleconference?”

“Terrific! What about Friday evening?”

“That’d be fine.”

“I’ll check with Frank, the Christian history professor I told you about. And I’ll confirm by e-mail.”

\* \* \* \* \*

On Wednesday afternoon, Grace came to visit Samantha. Samantha smiled and welcomed her friend inside.

After they were seated in the living room, Grace said, “I’ve been thinking ... maybe reading some words from the scriptures might help comfort you. In fact, I came over here with a specific passage in mind.”

Samantha sat up straight, feeling a twinge of hope. “Thank you. That sounds like a great idea.”

Samantha grabbed her favorite Bible (the NASB translation) and asked which passage Grace wanted them to read.

“Let’s read a passage from the book written by Jesus’s disciple Luke. Let’s read Luke, chapter four, verses seventeen and eighteen.”

After Samantha found the passage, Grace read it aloud: “And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to [Jesus]. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME,  
BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR.  
HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES,  
AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND,  
TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED.”

When they were done, Grace looked up. “You see, whenever we are down and out, it’s always good to remember that Jesus came to free us from whatever is oppressing us.”

Samantha appreciated her friend’s attempt. However, the little pep talk wasn’t even making a dent in her depression. “This is a nice reminder. Thank you.”

Samantha looked at the page where those words were written. She noticed that the footnote said that Jesus was reading from the sixty-first chapter of the book of Isaiah (one of the books from the Jewish scriptures that is included in the Christian Bible). “Grace, let’s go to the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah, the chapter where Luke said Jesus was reading from.”

Samantha and Grace both flipped to the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah. Grace read the entire chapter silently to herself. When she finished, she looked up and saw Samantha staring at her Bible with a bewildered look on her face. “Samantha, what’s wrong?”

“Grace, this is really strange. The words written in Isaiah aren’t the same words that Jesus read.”

“What do you mean?” Grace asked. “They look the same to me.”

“Here, let me show you.” Samantha took out a piece of paper and drew a line down the middle. She labeled the left half “The words Luke said Jesus read from Isaiah” and the right half “The words written in the book of Isaiah.” Then she copied the words from Luke side-by-side with the words from Isaiah:

<b>The words Luke said that Jesus read from Isaiah</b>	<b>The words written in the book of Isaiah</b>
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,	The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
Because He anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor,	Because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted,
[missing]	He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,	To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And recovery of sight to the blind,	[missing]
To set free those who are oppressed.	And freedom to prisoners.

Samantha pointed to her chart. “See, the book of Isaiah mentions ‘the brokenhearted’, but those words are missing from what Luke said Jesus read. Also, Luke said that Jesus read the words ‘recovery of sight to the blind’, yet those words are missing from the book of Isaiah.”

Grace sighed. “Well, the differences don’t seem too important.”

“Yes, but the scriptures are inspired word-for-word by God,” Samantha retorted. “And I used to study from the NASB version because I thought that it was accurately translated word-for-word. I didn’t realize there were entire phrases mismatched in this translation.”

Grace rolled her eyes. “You and Jonathon are always so analytical.”

Samantha understood what her friend meant. Samantha had been one of the few female engineering students at Clarkson University, the engineering college where she had met Jonathon. Their love of the Bible combined with their passion for all things analytical had created a special bond between them.

As a highly trained engineer, Samantha couldn’t let the discrepancy pass by without understanding why it existed. She stood up, went into the den, and opened another copy of the Bible, this one a King James translation. To her amazement it contained the very same discrepancy: only Isaiah mentioned “the brokenhearted,” and only Luke mentioned “the blind.” So she grabbed yet another translation—the NIV—only to become even more surprised; it too had the exact differences. She tossed the NIV onto the desk and went back into the living room.

“Grace, the three most popular translations of the Bible – the NIV, the NASB, and the KJV – all have the exact same contradiction. How can this be?”

“Why don’t you find out why they’re different?” Grace encouraged. “I’m sure someone must have written about it.”

“I will. It just seems so odd.”

While Grace seemed to easily shrug off the contradiction, Samantha felt there had to be a profoundly important reason why the quotes were different. After all, she was always taught that the words of the Bible were exact, word for word. Yet she knew it was impossible for both Luke and Isaiah to be correct on a word-for-word basis, given their differences.

Samantha sat with a puzzled look on her face. “Which one has the right words, Luke or Isaiah? And why do all the translations have the same exact contradiction?”

And when the implications of her questions hit her, the intrigue gave way to worry. “Something is terribly wrong.”

## Chapter Six

Peter woke from his fitful sleep Wednesday evening. Although he hadn't eaten in a couple days, there was only one thing he really wanted—more crystal meth.

If Peter had snorted the meth, he probably wouldn't have become addicted so quickly. But by smoking it, he quickly experienced a degree of physical dependency.

Not even bothering to shower or eat, Peter headed straight for Stardust. He found Chuck at the club, made his purchase, and then went home to smoke.

\* \* \* \* \*

On Wednesday night, Samantha decided to restart her habit of reading the Bible before falling asleep. Normally, she would read from the NASB translation. But as she walked into the den, she noticed the NIV translation she had left on the desk. So she picked it up, went into the bedroom, and joined Jonathon under the sheets.

Still bothered by the Isaiah/Luke conflict, she once again flipped to the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah. This time, she noticed that a footnote in the NIV translation contained an explanation: “brokenhearted” was in the Hebrew version, whereas “blind” was in the Septuagint.

Ever since childhood, Samantha had been taught that Jesus and his disciples read from a Hebrew version of the Jewish scriptures. Yet the NIV's footnote indicated the words Jesus read are not found in the Hebrew version of the Jewish scriptures. Rather, the NIV footnote says the words Jesus read are found in something called ‘a Septuagint.’

Rather than closing the case, the NIV's footnote only generated more questions. “What is a Septuagint?” she wondered. “Luke said that Jesus read the word ‘blind.’ So Jesus must have been reading this Septuagint thing, not the Hebrew scriptures that are used in my Bible ... But that's strange. Because if Jesus read from a Septuagint and not the Hebrew, then why aren't any of my Bibles translated from this Septuagint? Why aren't my Bibles translated from the same scriptures that Jesus used?”

Samantha turned to Jonathon. “Honey, have you ever heard of something called a Septuagint?”

“No, dear, why do you ask?”

“It’s a new word I heard today. I’ll look it up tomorrow.”

“Okay, honey.” Jonathon yawned. “Wake me if you need anything.”

“Good night, dear. I love you.”

“I love you, too, sweetheart.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Samantha woke with one thought on her mind: “What is a Septuagint?” While Jonathon got ready for work, she went straight to the den to get a copy of the *American Heritage Dictionary*. She found the entry for Septuagint:

**Sep·tu·a·gint** (sĕp'tôô-ə-jĭnt', sĕp-tôô'ə-jənt, -tyôô'-) n.  
A Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures that dates from the 3rd century B.C., containing both a translation of the Hebrew and additional and variant material, regarded as the standard form of the Old Testament in the early Christian Church and still canonical in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Samantha was so taken aback by the dictionary entry that she reread the definition five times to make sure she understood it correctly. She knew the Jewish scripture section of her Bible (a section called the Old Testament) was translated from a Hebrew version of the Jewish scriptures—the same scriptures she was taught that Jesus used. She was surprised to discover that a Greek version called the Septuagint served as the standard scripture for the early Church. She had never even heard of the Greek Septuagint version of the Jewish scriptures before.

“That doesn’t make sense,” she thought. “I have already seen that the Septuagint and the Hebrew aren’t the same on a word-for-word basis. So if Jesus considered the Greek Septuagint to be the precise words of God, then how come none of my Bibles are translated from that version?”

Samantha took it a step further. “The dictionary doesn’t specifically say that Jesus considered the Septuagint to be scripture,” she reasoned. “And the book of Luke only said Jesus read from the Septuagint version of Isaiah. While this might strongly imply that Jesus considered the Septuagint to contain the divinely inspired words of scripture, it doesn’t explicitly prove

it. So how can I be absolutely certain which version Jesus considered to contain the words of God?”

Samantha was determined to find the answer.

\* \* \* \* \*

On Friday evening, Jonathon anxiously dialed into the conference call and waited for the other two to arrive. “Frank Wright here.”

“I’m here too,” said Dr. Richmond.

After Jonathon introduced the two men, he smiled. The moment had finally arrived. “Gentlemen, thank you both for agreeing to this conference call. I’m hoping I’ll learn a lot from your dialogue.”

Dr. Richmond began the debate. “Frank, are you intimately familiar with the history of universal salvation—the doctrine that every soul eventually returns to God?”

Frank answered. “I teach my students the history of all the major heresies, including universal salvation.”

“Well, I’m glad you teach your students about it,” Dr. Richmond replied. “Given that virtually all the original Christians believed it.”

“That’s quite an oversimplification, I must say,” Frank rebutted.

“If I’m oversimplifying, please, why don’t you enlighten me?”

Frank didn’t even hesitate for a moment. “The original founders of Christianity taught that sinners get what they deserve—to rot in hell for all eternity. The heresy that every soul unites with God was not introduced to Christianity until the third century. It was first taught by Origen, the head of the Christian theological school at Alexandria.”

Dr. Richmond sounded incredulous. “So you teach your seminary students that before the third century, Christians exclusively taught the doctrine of eternal punishment?”

“Of course,” Frank replied.

Dr. Richmond continued. “But Frank, the earliest records of any definitive church teachings regarding the length of punishment are from the second century, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“And aren’t there second century Christian documents that teach universal salvation, documents such as the Alexandrian Christian homilies, the *Sibylline Oracles*?”

“Uh, well ... yes, I’ve heard of them,” Frank admitted.

Dr. Richmond pressed on. “So if the teaching of universal salvation dates back to the second century, how can you teach your students it was introduced to Christianity by Origen in the third century? How can you

say that Origen started the idea of universal salvation in the third century when it was already being taught before he was even born?”

Frank countered. “All right, maybe Origen didn’t start universal salvation per se. But he did introduce a heretical way of interpreting the scriptures. He taught that the scriptures shouldn’t be interpreted literally. Instead, he taught a non-literal, allegorical method of scripture interpretation. And it was this non-literal way of interpreting scripture that led many churches in the East astray.”

Dr. Richmond paused. “So you’re saying the only reason the early Christians in the East believed in universal salvation was because they took an allegorical, non-literal approach to interpreting the Bible? An approach they learned from Origen?”

“Well, of course,” Frank confidently responded. “If the scriptures are taken literally, at face value, then anyone would have to accept the reality of hell’s eternal existence.”

“Then how do you explain the Eastern theological school of Antioch?”

“What do you mean?” Frank asked rather dismissively.

Dr. Richmond answered with a slightly sarcastic tone, “Well, Frank, wasn’t the Antioch school known for its insistence on a very strict literal interpretation of the scriptures? Wasn’t it even founded in opposition to Origen and his allegorical school?”

“Yes,” Frank mumbled weakly.

“So then why don’t *you* tell Jonathon what the Antioch school, the one dedicated to a literal interpretation of the scriptures, taught regarding the fate of sinners?” Dr. Richmond insisted.

There was total silence for about twenty seconds.

“Okay,” Frank finally said. “The theological school in Antioch taught that the souls of sinners will receive eternal life after being purified in the fires of hell.”

“So now we agree on two things,” Dr. Richmond proudly declared. “We agree that the doctrine of universal salvation is found in the earliest Christian literature, and it was taught by allegorical and literal theological schools alike.”

Frank balked. “Doc, your little summary is only true of the theological schools of the East. The reality of eternal damnation in hell was always maintained in the West.”

“What?” Dr. Richmond asked. “Are you not familiar with an early second-century book entitled *The Apocalypse of Peter*?”

“A little,” Frank responded.

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“Well, another second century document, called the Muratorian Fragment, records that *The Apocalypse of Peter* was widely read in the churches of the West,” Dr. Richmond explained.

“And your point is?” Frank asked.

“My point is simple,” Dr. Richmond replied. “In *The Apocalypse of Peter*, God releases the souls from hell at the request of the Christians. The book taught universal salvation—showing many Western churches must have also embraced universal salvation from the very beginning of Christianity.”

Frank winced. “I guess it’s possible that *some* of the first Western Christians were misled. But you have to admit that *most* Christians in the West never believed it.”

“Frank, what history books do you read?” Dr. Richmond asked. “In the early fifth century, didn’t Saint Augustine lament in the first sentence of chapter 112 of *Enchiridion* that ‘indeed *most persons* deplore the eternal punishment, and perpetual, unintermittent torments of the lost, and say they do not believe it shall be so.’ Didn’t he write that the *majority* of Christians in Rome, the very heart of Western Christianity, believed that the punishment of sinners will be temporary?”

“Uh ... yes. He did write that,” Frank conceded.

Dr. Richmond asserted, “So archaeology has revealed the *Sibylline Oracles* were very popular in the second century churches of the East and *The Apocalypse of Peter* was very popular in the second century churches of the West, documenting that the teaching of universal salvation was widespread in the earliest churches of both the East and the West. And Saint Augustine’s *Enchiridion* documents that the teaching of universal salvation remained the mainstream Christian belief up into the beginning of the fifth century – despite the official teachings of the Roman theological school. In other words, it’s just as I said at the very beginning of this conversation, *virtually all the original orthodox Christians embraced the doctrine of universal salvation.*”

The line remained totally silent for almost a minute. Finally, Frank broke the silence. “I simply cannot agree to characterize it that way,” he said. “Jonathon, it’s very clear that Dr. Richmond knows how to use a lot of doubletalk to box me into a corner. And it’s also obvious that he and I are operating from different sets of assumptions. I don’t see how it would be useful to continue this conversation.”

Jonathon was totally confused, but he responded the only way he could. “Okay. Well, thanks for your time. Both of you.”

With that, Frank hung up the phone, leaving Jonathon and Dr. Richmond on the line.

Dr. Richmond started speaking. “Jonathon, don’t hold anything against Frank. He’s simply regurgitating something he likely learned when he was in seminary. In fact, the idea of setting up Origen as the straw man of universal salvation dates all the way back to the fifth century to a man named Jerome.” Dr. Richmond hesitated for a moment. His voice took on a very serious tone as he said, “And, Jonathon, there is something very important I need to tell you about Jerome. Jerome—”

Jonathon cut the professor off. “Professor, I apologize, but my head is more than full right now. I really appreciate your time. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Jonathon. I hope this was helpful.”

“It was. And it was generous of you to agree to it.”

“My pleasure. Take care, Jonathon.”

The two men hung up the phone.

Jonathon’s mind was numb. The debate had played out very differently than he expected.

## Chapter Seven

On Saturday afternoon, Peter came down from yet another two-day crystal meth high. He could hardly believe that almost a whole week had passed since Jamie had died. The house was a wreck. He was a bigger wreck. He dragged himself to the bedroom and crashed.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Mark and Grace arrived at the Webbers' on Saturday, Samantha couldn't wait to talk about her discovery. "Remember our Bible study the other day where Luke said Jesus read the words 'recovery of sight to the blind' in the book of Isaiah?"

"Yes."

"Well, it turns out those words are not in the Hebrew version of the Jewish scriptures. Those words are in a Greek version of the Jewish scriptures, called the Septuagint. And since Jesus read those words, then he must have been reading from the Septuagint, a different version of the Jewish scriptures than the ones used in the Old Testament section of our Bibles. Isn't that interesting?"

"It is," Grace concurred.

Samantha continued. "But what bothers me is: Did Jesus consider the Greek Septuagint to be the inspired Word of God? And—" Samantha suddenly stopped, a look of excitement beaming from her face. "Of course! I've just figured it out! It will be easy to find out which version Jesus considered to be authentic!"

Grace looked taken aback. "What are you talking about?"

Samantha explained. "All we have to do is to find places in the Bible where Jesus quotes from the Jewish scriptures. If his quotes match the Hebrew scriptures used in our Bible, then that must be the version Jesus considered to represent the words of God. But if Jesus' quotes match the Septuagint, then that must be the one!"

"That's a great idea. Let me know what you find out. By the way, are you going to church tomorrow?"

Samantha hung her head. "No. You're the only person I'm up to seeing right now. Maybe I'll start attending services next week."

Grace hugged her friend. "I understand."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark was watching football in the living room with Jonathon while his wife visited with Samantha. "So, Jonathon, you haven't told me about the battle between the two professors."

Jonathon was hoping Mark had forgotten about it. "Well, I have to say it didn't go anything like the way I thought it would."

"What happened?" Mark asked.

A defeated look came upon Jonathon's face. "If I had to judge the debate, I'd have to say the liberal professor won. You know, it's funny, but I felt like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. She thought the wizard was this giant, powerful being—until she pulled back the curtain and saw the little munchkin of a man. That's exactly how I felt about Frank. He's one of the top historical experts in our church, but Dr. Richmond's references completely squashed Frank's characterization of church history. I always thought the experts in our denomination had everything pretty much figured out."

Mark sternly replied. "But, Jonathon, remember, just because someone's a good debater, it doesn't mean their conclusions are correct. Maybe that liberal professor is simply a better talker."

"Yeah, I've thought about that," Jonathon muttered unconvincingly.

\* \* \* \* \*

The moment Mark got home he headed straight to the phone to call Pastor Rick.

"I'm concerned about Jonathon," he told the pastor. "I think this whole mission to convert the professor is affecting his walk with Christ. That smart-talking liberal professor outmaneuvered your friend Frank, and it's really shaken Jonathon."

"I'll give Frank a call this evening to find out what happened. Don't worry, I'll get to the bottom of this and follow up with Jonathon," the pastor assured him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peter awoke Saturday night and realized his cravings for another hit of crystal meth were getting out of control. "Who cares if I am addicted?" he asked himself.

He opened the nightstand and withdrew fifty dollars from Jamie's stash of five hundred. Then he headed out to Stardust once again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonathon and Samantha awoke at the same time Sunday morning.

“Are you going to church?” Jonathon asked.

“No, honey. Not today. I’m not ready to answer everyone’s questions about what happened.”

Jonathon gently stroked his wife’s arm. “I understand, and I know the people in the church do, too.”

Samantha rose from the bed. “And please don’t worry about me being alone this morning. I have my own Bible study already planned for today.” She couldn’t wait to research Jesus’s quotes.

Jonathon smiled. “I’m very glad to hear that, dear,” he said as he got out of bed. “Well, I’d better get myself ready for church.”

“I can make breakfast,” Samantha offered brightly. It was the first meal that she had volunteered to make since Jamie had passed on.

The moment Jonathon left, Samantha began her analysis. She decided to examine every place in the Bible where Jesus quoted the book of Isaiah, the same biblical book she and Grace read from the other day.

To do her analysis, Samantha divided pieces of paper into three sections. She wrote Jesus’s quotes of Isaiah in the middle section. On the left she copied the words from the book of Isaiah in her Bible. On the right, she used the footnotes in the NIV translation to reconstruct the words found in the Septuagint. Then she underlined each place where one version of Jewish scriptures agreed more with Jesus’s quote than the other.

For example, some of Samantha’s entries looked like:

My Bible's book of Isaiah	Jesus's Quote	Septuagint's book of Isaiah
Isaiah 6:10	Matthew 13:15	Isaiah 6:10
Make the heart of this people calloused;	For the heart of this people <u>has become</u> dull,	This people's heart <u>has become</u> calloused;
Make their ears dull	with their ears they <u>scarcely hear</u> ,	They <u>hardly hear</u> with their ears,
and close their eyes.	and <u>they have closed</u> their eyes,	And <u>they have closed</u> their eyes
Isaiah 29:13	Mark 7:7	Isaiah 29:13
Their worship of me	But <u>in vain</u> do they worship me,	They worship me <u>in vain</u>
is made up only of rules taught by men	<u>teaching</u> as doctrines the precepts of men.	<u>their teachings</u> are but rules taught by men.

When Samantha examined the entries she created, she realized that Jesus's quotes agreed with the Greek Septuagint, not the Hebrew translation used in her Bible.

"I don't know what to make of this," she pondered. "So far, the passages I've examined in the Septuagint seem pretty close to the words in my Bible anyway. But could there be passages where the two versions are very different? And even if they are very similar, our Church teaches that every word in the Bible is inspired by God. I've heard many sermons about the meanings of the precise words used in the Bible. Yet now I know those preachers based their sermons on an Old Testament section of the Bible that contains different words than the one Jesus taught from. I really don't know how to sort all this out."

## Chapter Eight

After Sunday school, Pastor Rick rushed to the foyer to catch Jonathon.

“Listen, Jonathon, I talked to Frank last night, and he told me you guys had a very rough go around with the university professor.”

Jonathon grimaced. “Yeah, you could say that.”

The pastor placed his hand on Jonathon’s shoulder. “Frank filled me in on the details. Do you mind if I give you some advice?”

“Not at all, Pastor.”

“I think you and Frank approached this from the wrong perspective,” the pastor explained. “That’s why you got sideswiped.”

“What do you mean?”

The pastor clarified. “Jonathon, you guys focused too much on what the early Christians believed, which doesn’t really matter at all. It wouldn’t matter even if 99 percent of the early Christians taught something, if what they taught contradicts the word of God. The only thing that matters is what *Jesus* taught. You and Frank took the historical bait. That’s how the professor snagged you.”

It was as if a two-by-four hit Jonathon between the eyes. “Wow! You know ... you’re right! I don’t know why I didn’t see it before.”

The pastor chuckled. “Sometimes we get so close to things that it’s easy to get misled. I was thinking ... what would you think about my mentoring you through this mission of yours?”

“I’d really appreciate that.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonathon met Pastor Rick in his study promptly after the service.

Pastor Rick began. “Did you show the professor passages from the Bible where Jesus says that the unrighteous will be cast into the everlasting lake of fire when he returns to earth?”

“No,” Jonathon replied. “But I don’t think that will convince him anyway.”

“Why not? Jesus’s words are stated so clearly.”

“I’ve seen how this guy operates. I can already hear him saying something like, ‘Yeah, that’s what your Bible says in English, but Jesus’s words weren’t written in English. They were written in Greek.’”

Pastor Rick appeared to be startled. “So you think this guy might challenge the way the Bible has been translated?”

“I think he’ll use any wiggle room he can to avoid seeing the truth.”

The pastor shook his head. “It’s amazing how stubborn some people can be.”

“Yeah,” Jonathon said. “We have to show the professor something simple ... something so compact that there isn’t any wiggle room.”

After a long period of silence, the pastor smiled deviously. “If it’s Greek he wants, then it’s Greek he’ll get!”

Jonathon grinned. “What are you thinking?”

“I agree with you, we need something short and sweet—and we need it in the same language Jesus is quoted in. Jesus’s disciple Matthew records in his book of the Bible that Jesus used the precise phrase ‘eternal punishment’ to describe the final destination of sinners.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So here’s my plan: First, we look up the phrase ‘eternal punishment’ in the Greek manuscript to find out which Greek words comprise the phrase. Then we take this simple phrase to the good doctor and ask him to have a language professor at his university translate it for him. When his very own colleague tells him it means ‘*eternal* punishment,’ we inform him this was the phrase Jesus used to describe the fate of sinners. He’ll have no wiggle room. If he’s a rational man, he’ll be forced to acknowledge his defeat.”

“I don’t know how much patience this guy’s going to have with me,” Jonathon said. “He’s already completed a long conference call on my behalf. Asking him to get something translated might be asking too much.”

Pastor Rick disagreed. “It seems to me that this fellow has an axe to grind against Christianity. Otherwise, why else would he already have spent so much time trying to upset your faith? And this makes me think he must habitually attack the faith of others as well.”

After considering the pastor’s words, Jonathon concurred. “He does seem awfully motivated to get me to change my mind, which only makes me even more determined to convert him before he damages someone else’s faith. It seems very clear to me why God put him in my path. Do you have any reference books here in your study that could show us the phrase ‘eternal punishment’ in Greek?”

The pastor grabbed an Interlinear New Testament—a version of the Bible written in the original Greek with the English equivalent of each word written underneath. “I studied Greek in seminary, of course, and this

is the text we used.” He found the passage. “Here it is. Matthew records that Jesus called the fires of hell ‘aionios kolasis’—which is Greek for ‘eternal punishment.’”

Jonathon copied the phrase ‘aionios kolasis’ letter for letter.

“Oh yeah, don’t forget to ask for the words to be translated from Hellenistic Greek. That’s the version of Greek the New Testament was written in. We can’t let even the smallest detail slip, or the professor will likely use it against us.”

Jonathon made a note to himself. “Got it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

On Sunday evening, toward the end of dinner, Samantha listened to Jonathon’s new approach toward the professor. “Honey,” she said, “don’t be too disappointed if the professor doesn’t follow through on getting your Greek phrase translated.”

“If God wants me to get through to him, he’ll open the door,” Jonathon replied. “I’ve got to leave this in his hands.” Jonathon rose to get some dessert from the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonathon didn’t waste any time Monday morning before calling the professor and asking him to have the Hellenistic Greek phrase ‘aionios kolasis’ translated. To his surprise, the professor didn’t put up any resistance, nor did he even ask why.

“God must be moving this along,” Jonathon thought. “Hallelujah.”

\* \* \* \* \*

As soon as Dr. Donald Richmond hung up the phone, he called a colleague of his, a doctor of linguistics. “Listen, Charles, I have a favor to ask you. I have a pesky but well-intentioned guy who asked me to have a Greek phrase translated. I assume it’s related to some soul-searching he’s been doing since his son died in a tragic car accident. I really feel sorry for him and his wife, and if this little task helps him out, that would be great.”

“You’ve always had a bleeding heart, Don,” Charles remarked. “How much translating does he want?”

“Just a two-word phrase written in Greek—Hellenistic Greek, to be precise,” Dr. Richmond replied.

“That’s fine. Should only take me a couple minutes. All the known Greek manuscripts from the Hellenistic period are being digitized so they

can be electronically searched. I can go online to perseus.org and cross-reference it in seconds.”

“Thanks, Charles. The Hellenistic Greek phrase is ‘aionios kolasis.’”

“Easy enough. I’ll e-mail you the results at the end of day.”

\* \* \* \* \*

That evening, Dr. Richmond logged into his computer before leaving the university. He noticed an e-mail waiting in his inbox from Charles. He opened and read it. “Very interesting,” he thought. He added a little note and then forwarded the e-mail to Jonathon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night, Jonathon found the e-mail from Dr. Richmond. Nothing could have prepared him for the contents of the e-mail. He became so upset that he started shaking. “No!” he shouted out loud. “This can’t be right! There must be some mistake!”

After Jonathon closed the e-mail, he sat in dazed silence for several minutes.

## Chapter Nine

Visibly shaken and disturbed, Jonathon got up and went to the bedroom.

“What’s wrong, honey?” his wife asked him.

“It’s ... it’s just that I’m going to give up trying to convert that professor. That’s all. I’m through.”

“Why? What happened?”

“I’m too upset to talk about it.”

Samantha was worried about her husband giving up. She had seen how the project helped him deal with the loss of their son. “If only there was some way I could help,” she mused. Then it hit her like a ton of bricks. “Oh, of course there’s a way I can help!”

Samantha had assumed from the look on Jonathon’s face that the university professor had refused to look up the Greek phrase. She thought, “If that professor really knows the history of Christianity as well as he claims, then he knows that Jesus and his disciples considered the Greek Septuagint to be the inspired word of God. I’m going to surprise Jonathon and find out if the Septuagint uses the two words he wrote down. And if it does, I can give him undeniable historical proof for the meaning of Jesus’s words, proof that the professor cannot ignore.”

Samantha needed to buy a little time to see if her plan would work. “Honey, why don’t you wait a couple days before deciding whether to end this project or not? Pray about it. I know you are upset now, but maybe God has a way of turning things around.”

Jonathon sighed. “I don’t see how anything’s going to change. But I’ll wait a couple days. After all, it’s going to be hard to face the pastor and tell him I’ve failed.”

Samantha comforted her husband. “Good night, honey. Hang in there.”

“Good night.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning, after Jonathon left for work, Samantha went into the den, fiercely determined to help her husband. Sitting down at the computer, she conducted an Internet search for “Septuagint aionios.”

Within seconds, more than a thousand results to her query popped up on the computer screen.

Quickly moving beyond her surprise at the numerous entries, Samantha started clicking on them one by one. Eventually she came across a Web site for the Church of the Apostolic Fathers, a church located very close to her home. "This is perfect," she thought. "The pastor of this church has a PhD in language studies from an evangelical university."

Samantha dialed the contact number on the Web site, introduced herself, and presented her question to Reverend Tompkins. "I was wondering if you wouldn't mind answering some Bible questions for me related to the Greek language."

"That's my favorite topic," the reverend replied. "In fact, I did both my master's and doctorate on the theological implications of biblical Greek linguistics."

"That's terrific!" Samantha exclaimed. "I was wondering if you might be able to help me understand some Greek words as they are used in the Septuagint."

"Unfortunately, I'm on my way out and don't have a lot of time at this moment. But if you could come by the church tomorrow afternoon, I'll be glad to answer any questions you may have. Two o'clock okay?"

"That's great. I'll bring my notes."

Smiling, Samantha hung up the phone.

\* \* \* \* \*

After work, Jonathon decided to swing by Mark's house with a copy of the e-mail he received from Dr. Richmond. Mark's son George was visiting when Jonathon arrived.

"Jonathon, you don't look like yourself today. Is everything all right?" Mark asked as he ushered him inside.

"Grace, George, do you mind if I talk to Mark privately in the other room?"

"Sure," Grace said. "Is everything all right with Samantha?"

"She's fine. I just need to talk to Mark about something personal."

Grace and George sped off to the kitchen without further delay. Mark led Jonathon to the sofa, which was located very close to the kitchen entrance.

Jonathon described the seemingly bulletproof plan concocted by the pastor and himself. "Jesus specifically labeled the punishment of sinners as 'aionios kolasis.' Therefore, both the pastor and I were 100 percent confident the *only* meaning must be 'eternal punishment.'"

“Okay. So what happened?”

“This happened,” Jonathon muttered as he put a copy of the e-mail in Mark’s hand.

Mark read the e-mail:

-- New Message --

Jonathon,  
Below is the response I received regarding your translation request.  
I hope this proves helpful to you.  
Kindest Regards,  
Donald Richmond, PhD.

-- Forwarded Message --

Don –

This was a piece of cake. I not only found the primary definition of each word, but a digital search located the exact phrase “aionios kolasis” within the writings of the famous Hellenistic Greek writer, Philo (20 BC–50 AD). The passage of Philo containing the phrase is preserved in a Greek fragment found in *The Parallels of John of Damascus*.

The passage containing this phrase has already been authoritatively translated by Charles Duke Yonge, the scholar who wrote the standard translation for *The Parallels of John of Damascus*. Regarding the passage containing “aionios kolasis,” Dr. Yonge translated Philo’s words as follows:

It is better absolutely never to make any promise at all than not to assist another willingly, for no blame attaches to the one, but great dislike on the part of those who are less powerful, and intense hatred and long enduring punishment from those who are more powerful, is the result of the other line of conduct.

Dr. Yonge translated the phrase “aionios kolasis” as “long enduring punishment.” Given the context of Philo’s passage, the length of the punishment would be a few years to about a decade.

Below I’ve copied the primary definition of each Greek word from perseus.org. Notice that Dr. Yonge’s translation is fully consistent with both the primary definition of each word, and the context of Philo’s passage.

Word	<i>Primary Definition</i>
aionios	lasting for an age
kolasis	chastisement, correction, punishment

I've also cut and pasted the links that contain the primary definition of each word. I always encourage my students to use the reference tools themselves. I think your friend will benefit greatly from doing the same.

Primary definition of aionios:

<http://www.perseus.org/cgi-bin/morphindex?lookup=aio%5Enios&.submit=Analyze+Form&searchText=&lang=greek&formentry=1>

Primary definition of kolasis:

<http://www.perseus.org/cgi-bin/morphindex?lookup=kolasis&.submit=Analyze+Form&searchText=&lang=greek&formentry=1>

Hope this proves helpful.

Charles

-- End of Message --

Jonathon shook the e-mail in front of Mark's face. "Don't you see? The meaning of the phrase 'aionios kolasis' was 'long enduring punishment'—not 'eternal punishment.' The plan not only failed, it backfired! The phrase means the opposite of what the pastor and I were expecting!"

Mark shrugged. "So? Just consider the source, a secular liberal professor. You're not going to start questioning the way the Bible is translated just because of this piece of crap, are you? Jonathon, all the translators of every major Bible translation—NIV, NASB, and the King James—have all translated the phrase in the exact same way: eternal punishment. You aren't going to let one humanistic madman stack up against all the godly men who have translated the Bible, are you?"

Jonathon sighed, exasperated. “It’s just that each time I’ve looked for an answer outside of the church, I get smacked in the face with an unpleasant surprise. It’s very unsettling. I don’t know how I can talk to the pastor about this e-mail. I don’t want him to think I’m starting to doubt our church’s beliefs.”

Mark smiled. “If you want, I can talk to the pastor on your behalf about this e-mail.”

Jonathon thought about it for a moment. “Thanks. That would be great.”

On his way home, Jonathon started thinking, “I’ve never considered the possibility that Jesus’s words may have been mistranslated. What if Jesus actually meant long enduring punishment? Is it possible that Jamie will not be in hell forever? Could it be possible I will see my boy one day in the kingdom of God? Dear God, I don’t know what to think.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day, Samantha arrived at the Church of the Apostolic Fathers promptly at two o’clock. She found the pastor’s study and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Pastor Tompkins said in a loud voice.

Samantha opened the door and walked over to the pastor’s desk. As she extended her right hand, she said, “Hello, I’m Samantha.”

“Nice to meet you, Samantha.” The pastor shook her hand. “How can I help you?”

Out of respect for the pastor’s time, Samantha dove right in. “Do you know if the Septuagint ever uses the Greek word ‘aionios’ in any of its passages?” She was hoping that didn’t sound like a crazy question.

“The Septuagint uses that word 160 times to be exact,” the pastor answered immediately.

Samantha wondered how the pastor could possibly know the precise number off the top of his head. After taking pause, she continued. “Can you show me some passages that I can use to document that this word means eternal? More specifically, I want to document that Jesus unambiguously calls hell a place of ‘eternal punishment’ when he used the words ‘aionios kolasis’ to describe it.”

The pastor got a strange look on his face.

“Did I say something wrong?” Samantha inquired.

“Did you pretend to be interested in this topic, only to come ridicule our church?” the pastor asked.

Samantha jumped in her seat. “Of course not, I just came here because a link to your Web site popped up on a Google search. And I saw you had your doctorate in language studies from an evangelical college I respect, and—”

“All right,” the pastor said. “I’ll be very happy to answer your Septuagint question. The short answer is no.”

The pastor leaned back in his chair as if to signify that he completely addressed her question.

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand. No what?”

The pastor replied with a wry grin. “You asked me if I could help you document that the Septuagint uses the word *aionios* to convey the idea of eternity. And the answer is no, I cannot.”

Samantha felt dejected. “So you’re not willing to help me.”

“It’s not that, Samantha. It’s just that the Septuagint documents that *aionios* doesn’t inherently express the idea of eternity. That’s why the answer is no. Here, let me show you a Septuagint passage from the book of Psalms.”

Samantha and the pastor read together:

I thought about ancient days; and I remembered the long  
enduring years (Psalms 77:5 Septuagint).

The pastor commented. “The long enduring years were written as ‘*aionios* years’ in the Greek Septuagint. Yet here the author of the Psalms wrote that he’s remembering *aionios* years that *are already over*. He’s remembering *aionios* years from the past. If these years have already come and gone, then they certainly can’t be eternal, yet the Septuagint still calls them *aionios*.”

The pastor’s grin spread, covering his face from ear to ear. “Let me show you a couple more places where the Greek Septuagint uses the word ‘*aionios*’ to describe other things that are already over—other things that cannot possibly be considered eternal.”

Samantha read the following passages with the pastor. As she read them, she noticed he had underlined parts of them:

Do not fear that you have been disgraced, nor feel ashamed  
that you have been berated! You shall forget your long  
enduring shame, and you shall no longer remember the  
scorn of your widowhood (Isaiah 54:4 Septuagint).

And they shall build up the long enduring ruins that were previously desolated. They shall rise up and revive the ruined cities that were made desolate for many generations (Isaiah 61:4 Septuagint).

The pastor said, “That last passage is one of my favorites. Here the Septuagint equates aionios with ‘many generations.’ That is very far from eternal, wouldn’t you say?”

Samantha was getting a headache from trying to wrap her brain around what the pastor was showing her. “But I still don’t understand. Why then did Jesus use the phrase ‘aionios kolasis’ to describe ‘eternal punishment’?”

The pastor sighed. “Samantha, Jesus didn’t. He never taught that sinners are punished for all eternity.”

Samantha’s mouth opened wide in amazement. “What are you talking about?”

## Chapter Ten

Samantha sat stunned for a few moments. Pastor Thompkins's words didn't make any sense to her at all. "How can you say Jesus didn't teach that sinners will spend eternity in hell? Isn't that one of the most basic teachings of the New Testament?"

The pastor's voice took on an authoritative tone as he explained. "All theologians used to think the Hellenistic Greek word 'aionios' was synonymous with the English word 'eternal.' That's why, for centuries, it was believed that Jesus taught the idea of eternal punishment. However, in the late 1800s, archaeologists began uncovering many Greek manuscripts from the Hellenistic period that used the word *aionios* to describe temporary events—including events lasting only a few years."

Samantha nodded as he spoke.

The pastor continued. "As the mountain of evidence continued to pile higher, there has been a growing movement in both the Protestant and Catholic circles to change the way the entire New Testament is translated. The word *aionios* is used so often in the New Testament that it's fair to say that our entire understanding of the afterlife hinges on translating it correctly."

A lightbulb went on in Samantha's mind. "So that's why there were so many entries about it when I used Google!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, exactly. And that's why I knew how many times the word was used in the Septuagint," Pastor Tomkins responded. "Because I'm an avid reader of ancient Greek, I had to leave the evangelical community because I could not reconcile what I knew the meaning of that word to be with the Bibles I was told to read."

"What do you mean you *left* the evangelical community? Isn't this an evangelical church?" Samantha asked, frowning.

The pastor calmly replied, "No, Samantha. We don't preach that sinners are cast into an everlasting lake of fire at this church. We preach that the lake of fire is horribly painful—but temporary. It's designed to sear the sins out of the unrepentant soul, to purify and prepare the soul for eternal life with God."

Samantha began to think she was talking to a cult leader. It was time to leave. "Well, thank you for your time. It's been most interesting."

“Are you sure you don’t have any other questions?” the pastor asked.

“Oh, I’m sure,” Samantha instantly responded.

“We have services here every Sunday. Please think about stopping by,” said the pastor.

During Samantha’s drive home, she couldn’t get the Septuagint’s use of *aionios* out of her mind. She began thinking, “The Septuagint clearly used *aionios* to describe things that have already ended. And the Bible says that Jamie is going to suffer ‘*aionios* punishment.’ Could that possibly mean my son’s punishment will someday come to an end?”

“No, I shouldn’t think like this,” she said out loud. “I shouldn’t let a cult leader influence my mind. Shame on me!”

\* \* \* \* \*

That same afternoon, Mark was checking his e-mail when he noticed one from his son George. He opened the e-mail and became furious at what he read.

-- New Message --

Hey, Dad.

I’m sorry, but yesterday Mom and I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation with Mr. Webber. I got really curious about what you guys talked about. So I went online and checked it out myself.

I’m really confused by all the stuff floating around on the Web about the Greek word “*aionios*.” Like, I cut and pasted this from one site:

Before the New Testament was written:

“The second wall is in all other respects like the first but of twice the height. The third circuit is rectangular in plan, and is sixty cubits in height, built of a stone hard and naturally  durable  [*aionios*].” (Diodorus Siculus, *Library*, book 17, chapter 71 section 5)

The same time period as the New Testament was being written:

“... as was Jonathon condemned to  perpetual  [*aionios*] imprisonment [ for three years ]. And now the Romans set fire to the extreme parts of the city, and burnt them down,

and entirely demolished its walls.” (Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, Book 6, Section 434, as translated by William Whiston)

Two hundred years after the New Testament was written:

“Here again he means, that Satan occupies the space under Heaven, and that the incorporeal powers are spirits of the air, under his operation. For that his kingdom is eon enduring [aionios], in other words it will cease with the present eon, hear what he says at the end of the Epistle;” (Saint Chrysostum, *Homily of the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Ephesians*, Homily IV.)

The Web site says that before the New Testament was written, Diodorus used the Greek word aionios to describe something durable – not eternal. And during the same time period that the New Testament was written, Josephus used the word aionios to describe a three year imprisonment – something that lasted far short of eternity. And the website further says that after the New Testament was written, Chrysostum used the word aionios to emphasize the temporariness of Satan’s kingdom – the very opposite of eternalness. So the website concludes that since the above quotes demonstrate that the Greek word aionios did not inherently mean “eternal” in the time periods before, during, and after the New Testament was written, then the modern Bible must be translated incorrectly.

Do you think it could be right? Is it possible that our Bibles are translated incorrectly? What do you make of this, Dad?

George

-- End of Message --

Mark was livid. Jonathon’s doubts had affected his son. And when he imagined how they could spread to his darling grandchildren, he thought, “I have to cut this thing off right now.” He reached over, picked up the phone, and dialed the pastor’s residence.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark went straight to the pastor's house after work and showed Pastor Rick both e-mails: the one from Dr. Richmond and the one from his son George.

"Pastor, this project of Jonathon's hasn't caused the professor to budge one bit," he fumed, "but it's causing doubts to form in Jonathon's mind. And his doubts have already affected my son. This project needs to end—and end right now!"

The pastor winced. "Let me get a handle on this. I'll contact a language professor at seminary and find out what we're all missing. There must be a good explanation for all this. In the meantime, tell George that I'll get an answer to him as soon as I hear back. And I'll also talk to Jonathon about letting go of his determination to change the professor's mind."

"Pastor, I'd like to talk to Jonathon with you, if you don't mind," Mark declared. "I want to let him know how harmful his questioning can be to younger believers, like my son. I don't think he's thought about all the people he could hurt by questioning the word of God."

"Let me get busy finding an answer to all this," Pastor Rick replied. "And yes, of course, we can talk to Jonathon together."

\* \* \* \* \*

A couple days later, Mark received a call from Pastor Rick.

"Hello, Mark. I finally heard from a Christian language expert. He told me that the Greek word *aionios* had many meanings, with 'eternal' being one of them. And modern translators are confident Jesus used it to mean 'eternal.' They know this from the writings of a fifth-century language scholar named Jerome. For example, when Jerome translated the Bible from Greek into Latin, he translated Jesus's phrase as 'aeternum iusti'—which is Latin for 'eternal punishment.' This leaves no doubt regarding the meaning of Jesus's words and how his words were understood by the early Christians."

"Thank you, Pastor," Mark said with a sigh of relief. "And I hope this teaches Jonathon and George a lesson. I hope they learn not to question so much on their own. Maybe now they'll finally learn to leave these matters to the experts who know what they're talking about."

The moment the conversation ended, Mark dialed George and explained how the translators knew that Jesus's words meant eternal punishment. George said that he felt ashamed of himself. But Mark reminded him that he had done the right thing in talking to his father about it.

\* \* \* \* \*

When the pastor explained his findings—in Mark’s presence—it didn’t take Jonathon long to understand the significance of Jerome’s translating the phrase as “eternal punishment.” He felt ashamed for having allowed doubts to enter his mind. The first thing he did was to apologize to Mark. “I’m sorry if I’ve weakened George’s faith in any way.”

Mark responded, “George is fine—now. But I think this whole project of yours needs to come to an immediate end.”

The pastor chimed in. “I don’t think you should have any more contact with that professor.”

Jonathon sheepishly agreed.

Pastor Rick put his hand on Jonathon’s shoulder as he said, “I’ve been thinking a lot about all the secular trash you’ve been exposed to. And I think you need to wash your mind clean of polluted thoughts. So I’m going to give you a scripture prescription.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“One of the shortest books in the Bible is Second Peter, which was written by Peter, one of Jesus’s twelve disciples. Although it’s only three pages long, Peter writes a lot about the apocalyptic end of the world and the eternal destruction of sinners in the fiery wrath of God. I’m going to ask you to read Second Peter once every morning when you wake up and once again every night right before you go to sleep for one full month. As Peter’s description of the end times fills your mind, you will understand there isn’t even a remote possibility that the souls of sinners will be reconciled to God. All the lies you’ve been exposed to will give way to the truth found in God’s Holy Word.”

Jonathon nodded. “Thank you, Pastor,” he said. “I’ll not only read Second Peter twice a day, but I’ll also continue my daily Bible readings.”

“You’ve always been a devout student of God’s Word,” said Pastor Rick. “And I think that’s what has allowed you to stay steady in the faith.”

Jonathon began faithfully reading Second Peter morning and night. His life assumed a new calm—until he was blindsided by a new surprise.

Two weeks after Jonathon had promised to read Second Peter, he was completely floored by something he read in his daily Bible reading. Jonathon was reading the fourth chapter of the book of Acts in the Weymouth translation of the Bible. It was the thirteenth sentence that knocked him off his seat:

As they looked on Peter and John so fearlessly outspoken—and also discovered that they were illiterate persons, untrained in the schools—they were surprised; and now

they recognized them as having been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13 WEY)

“Do I understand this sentence correctly?” Jonathon asked himself as he reread the sentence again and again. “Because if Peter was illiterate, if he was unable to read or write, then how did he write Second Peter, the book of the Bible that I’ve been reading morning and night?”

Jonathon stopped at the Christian bookstore on his way home. He walked over to the Bible Commentary section and thumbed through J. N. D. Kelly’s commentary on Second Peter. He was dumbstruck when he read Dr. Kelly’s statement that “scarcely anyone nowadays” believes that Peter actually authored Second Peter.

Jonathon thought, “Pastor Rick believes Peter wrote it. And I’ve always heard he wrote it. But Dr. Kelly is one of the most eminent orthodox biblical scholars. Why does he say Peter didn’t write it? And why does he say it so strongly? And if Peter didn’t write it, is it a *forgery*?”

Jonathon had no idea that behind that question was the final piece of a puzzle that connected everything he had learned since Jamie died. He had no idea that he was going to discover a conspiracy that has been bitterly affecting Christendom for more than fifteen hundred years.

## Chapter Eleven

On Sunday morning, Samantha decided to attend church with her husband for the first time since the tragic loss of Jamie.

While she was sitting in Sunday school, thinking about all that had happened in the past few weeks, the teacher began her lesson. “This is the last Sunday of Church History Month, and we’re going to conclude with a discussion of the Jewish scriptures, the manuscripts that make up the Old Testament section of our Bible. The Old Testament books were written in Hebrew, and the Hebrew manuscripts have been faithfully preserved by the Jews to this very day. Our church was founded on the truth that God has supernaturally preserved his Word in the Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament. In fact, in order to become a member of this church, you must avow that the Hebrew Old Testament is the literal inspired word of God.”

Samantha began fidgeting in her chair. She knew that Jesus’s words agreed with the Greek Septuagint version of the Jewish scriptures, not a Hebrew one. Yet her church required faith that the Hebrew version was the literal inspired word of God.

“The pastor lectured Jonathon about his own doubts just a couple weeks ago,” she thought. “So now probably isn’t a good time for me to openly question one of the fundamental beliefs of our church. But I still want to understand—when did the church abandon the Greek Septuagint version used by Jesus? And even more importantly, *why* did they abandon it?”

Jonathon noticed the frown on Samantha’s face. “Are you okay, honey?” he asked. “Is it too much for you to be here?”

Samantha didn’t want to concern her husband with the questions that were parading through her mind. “I’m fine,” she assured him.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Sunday school was over, Jonathon caught up with Mark before the morning service.

“I’ve taken the week off of work,” Jonathon began. “Any chance you’d want to get together tomorrow for lunch?”

“Sure,” Mark replied. “Anything on your mind?”

“Nothing that can’t wait until tomorrow.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day, Jonathon met Mark at a local McDonald’s.

“What’s on your mind?” Mark asked.

Jonathon stuttered. “Well, I haven’t had any more contact with that professor, as I promised you and Pastor Rick. But I came across something on my own that upset me—about the Bible—the other day.”

“What is it, Jonathon?”

“You know Second Peter, the book of the Bible that emphasizes the apocalyptic destruction of sinners – the book the pastor recommended I study? Well ... I ... um ...” Jonathon finally blurted out, “Well, according to J. N. D. Kelley’s commentary, there is virtually unanimous consensus among biblical scholars that Peter didn’t write that book of the Bible.”

Mark sighed in relief. “That’s it? That’s what you’re so bothered about? So what if it turns out that another of Jesus’s apostles wrote the book? That wouldn’t be the first book of the Bible whose actual writer we’re uncertain of.”

“But in the text of Second Peter the author specifically claims to be Peter, the disciple of Jesus.”

Mark was puzzled. “Are you absolutely sure that the author of Second Peter claims to be Peter?”

Jonathon nodded. “I’ve been reading Second Peter morning and night for two weeks. I know very well what it says.”

Mark’s puzzlement gave way to absolute certainty. “But the very foundation of evangelical Christianity rests on the truth that the entire Bible is the inspired word of God! There can’t be anything written in the Bible that’s incorrect. If Second Peter says it was written by Peter, then Peter must have written it, plain and simple. This Kelley guy must be wrong, not the Bible.”

Jonathon pushed back. “Mark, I completely understood why you dismissed the e-mail I showed you the other day so easily. After all, that came from a liberal secular professor. But Dr. Kelley is an orthodox Christian scholar—one of the greatest authorities, in fact. So I can’t dismiss his statement quite so readily.”

Those words only made Mark angry. “Jonathon, is your faith in the Bible or in people? Are you going to trust God’s word or man’s word?”

Jonathon was put off by the insinuation. “Of course I will always continue to put my faith in God’s word. But who says that Second Peter is God’s word? When I read Dr. Kelley’s statement, it dawned on me. Jesus never chose the books of the Bible. He didn’t name which ones are inspired.

Jesus never said that the apocalyptic, fire and brimstone book of Second Peter is God's word." Jonathon was on a roll. "I don't know why it never dawned on me before that *people* chose which books made the list. And by blindly accepting the list of books I was handed, I was blindly putting my faith in the men who chose that list of books!"

Mark's anger steadily grew stronger the more Jonathon talked. "I've heard enough, and I won't stand for any more of this! Nothing good can come out of questioning the Bible. And I will not allow you to try to get me to question it, nor can I permit you to sow the seeds of doubt in my family's minds either. As the spiritual head of my family, I'm wondering whether you should step into my home until you've regained your faith in the truth of the Bible."

Jonathon felt as though a blunt knife had just been thrust into his back. "I guess it's better to end this conversation now," he said, rising to leave.

Mark remained seated. "Yes, this conversation is over."

Jonathon stumbled to the door, left the restaurant, and got into his car. "I'm probably blowing this whole thing out of proportion," he thought. "Dr. Kelley is just one man. And I don't know why I'm listening to one man's opinion without at least researching the topic myself."

Jonathon drove a couple more miles before inspiration hit him. "I know where I can find the answer," he said to himself. He made a U-turn, heading in the opposite direction from his home.

## Chapter Twelve

Samantha couldn't get the previous Sunday school class off her mind. "I wish I could be like most people and just let it go," she thought. "But I can't."

Samantha tried to ignore the contradiction between her knowledge of the Septuagint and the doctrine of her church. But hard as she tried, she couldn't.

"I feel like a hypocrite being a member of the church now that I doubt one of the required statements of faith. I must resolve this—but how? Pastor Rick just recently lectured Jonathon about his doubts, so I can't talk to him. And I don't want to get Jonathon worked up again; he's already been through enough with his own questions. And I don't want to look on the Internet and get confused by another cult leader. Where can I go?"

The answer to Samantha's question came when she brought in the mail. She stumbled across a brochure from the local Catholic university, advertising for enrollment. In it was a directory of numbers for potential students to call, so they could talk directly to a professor teaching in their desired field of study. One of the numbers caught her eye: Father Mahoney—Old Testament studies.

Samantha phoned the priest. "Hello, Father, my name is Samantha Webber, and I was wondering if you would be so kind as to answer a question for me. I was wondering if you could tell me why the Septuagint was initially accepted by the early church and why it was then later abandoned."

"An Old Testament history question—and a brilliant one at that!" Father Mahoney exclaimed. "I wish my students would ask questions like this. Unfortunately, the answer to your question will take a while to properly answer. But I love talking to people who are interested in the history of the Old Testament, whether they are students or not. I grade student papers Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 2:00 PM to 4:00 PM. Stop by at any of those times, and I'd be happy to discuss it with you."

Samantha's first instinct was to ask if she could call him instead, as she didn't want to impose any further. But she got the feeling that the professor really wanted to talk in person. "I'll be glad to stop by your office."

\* \* \* \* \*

Peter looked at himself in the mirror. He was a skeleton of a man, having dropped fifteen needed pounds. His eyes were framed by deep, dark circles. "I can't search for a job looking like this," he mumbled as he walked over to the cash drawer. "Only one hundred bucks left. And after it's over, so am I."

Peter gazed into the mirror once again, this time looking straight into his own eyes. "What's the point of going on, buddy?" he said, addressing himself. Then he curled his last three fingers and formed the shape of a gun with his thumb and forefinger. He pointed the imaginary gun at his head. "Enjoy your final week," he said to himself, bringing his thumb toward his index finger as if the trigger had been pulled.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Jonathon continued driving, he began to sympathize with Mark's strong reaction. After all, the foundation of their evangelical Christian faith was on the line. He and Mark had both based their lives on the premise that the entire Bible was God's literal inspired word.

Jonathon was desperate to get to the bottom of the issue. He remembered that the local Catholic university library was an excellent resource for historical religious research. So he turned the car toward the campus. Once inside the library, he went straight to the head librarian's desk.

"Can you tell me where I can find some reference works on Second Peter?" Jonathon politely asked her.

"Are you interested in pseudonymous works in general or Second Peter specifically?" the librarian asked.

"Excuse me? What is a 'pseudonymous work' exactly?" Jonathon inquired.

The librarian patiently replied, "A pseudonymous work is one that is written by a person who fictitiously ascribes the authorship of his work to another individual."

Jonathon was taken aback. "Are you saying that someone else wrote Second Peter and fictitiously claimed to be Peter, Jesus's disciple? Are you saying your library considers Second Peter to be a pseudonymous work?"

"Yes," the librarian responded rather matter-of-factly. She opened one of the drawers of her filing cabinet, pulled out a piece of paper, and handed it to Jonathon. The librarian said, "I keep a copy of the *New American Bible's* introduction to each biblical book. These introductions are sanctioned by

the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.” The librarian pointed at the page. “Look at this paragraph here.”

Among modern scholars there is wide agreement that Second Peter is a pseudonymous work, i.e., one written by a later author who attributed it to Peter ... indeed, many think it is the latest work in the New Testament and assign it to the first or even the second quarter of the second century.

After reading the paragraph aloud, the librarian continued. “Since there is ‘wide agreement’ among biblical scholars that ‘Second Peter is a pseudonymous work,’ our library categorizes it as such.”

Jonathon realized that if Second Peter was truly pseudonymous, then the text of Second Peter could not be inerrant. After all, the text itself says Peter wrote it. “And if the text of Second Peter is not literally correct, then how can I trust any of the other books of the Bible?” he asked himself. There was no way he could easily accept that Second Peter was written by another person.

Jonathon turned to the librarian. “Did the church always consider Second Peter to be pseudonymous?”

“No. It was the modern science of textual criticism that revealed Second Peter to be pseudonymous.”

Jonathon had never heard of the science of textual criticism before. “How exactly did this science produce such strong evidence that, as J. N. D. Kelley says, ‘scarcely anyone nowadays’ believes Second Peter to be authentic?”

The librarian shrugged. “Now you’re getting way beyond my area of expertise. Perhaps you should talk to the priest who heads our New Testament studies department.”

“Well, I’m not sure how willing he’d be to talk to a stranger off the street about this.”

“Nonsense.” The librarian smiled. “Most of the professors here are very passionate about their areas of expertise, especially those related to religious issues. There’s nothing they like more than to find an eager listener who is genuinely interested in what they have to say!”

Without even asking, the librarian reached for her phone, dialed a number, and listened to the earpiece for a few seconds. “Father Thomas,” she said. “This is Sister Catherine Johnson over at the library. I have a member of the community in front of me who wants to understand how

Second Peter came to be classified as pseudonymous by biblical scholars. May I send him over?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Samantha finished straightening up the living room and then gazed at the clock on the wall. "It's two o'clock," she thought. "And today is Monday. If I head over to the Catholic university now, I can catch the professor in his office." Samantha scribbled a quick note telling her husband she was going out.

On her way to the office for Old Testament studies, Samantha noticed that the office was precisely across the hall from the office for New Testament studies.

Just as Samantha walked through the opened door of the Old Testament studies, Jonathon turned the corner of the hallway, just missing her. As Jonathon got within two steps of being able to see Samantha in the other office, she closed the door at the professor's request.

\* \* \* \* \*

Father Mahoney motioned for Samantha to take a seat. "You wanted to know why the church abandoned the Septuagint, is that right?"

"Yes, I want to know when and why the church decided to replace it," she replied.

The priest studied Samantha. "Why do you want to know this?"

"Just personal curiosity. I noticed that the quotes from Jesus don't match the Old Testament," Samantha replied.

The priest smiled. "You noticed that. And from your question I assume you already know they do match the Septuagint."

"Yes, precisely," Samantha responded gleefully.

The priest was impressed that Samantha already knew that Jesus quoted from the Septuagint—and she appeared so eager to really understand the answer to her question. As he looked into her innocent eyes, he was aching to tell her the whole story.

Father Mahoney was mindful of his reputation for being a maverick. He often got into trouble for being too radical. He always believed truth was more important than tradition.

"Rather than answer you with the official church-sanctioned version of history, I'm going to tell you what actually happened. I rarely get the

opportunity to share what I know. But if you ever ask me to publicly confirm what I'm about to tell you, let me inform you right now, I'll deny it."

Samantha now understood why the priest wanted to meet in person. He had a secret he wanted to get off his chest.

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What surprises will Jonathon learn about 2 Peter?

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