

# Conversation Guide

## *Chapter 1*

1. *Clear Winter Nights* is the story of a young man who has begun questioning the Christian faith he previously took for granted. Describe your spiritual journey so far.
2. Have you ever been through a “dark night of the soul” when you felt separated from God? If so, what was it like?
3. When it comes to faith in God, what are you having doubts or questions about?
4. Chris’s fiancée, Ashley, encourages him to talk about his spiritual doubts with a trusted older adult. Who do you feel you can open up to safely about the deepest issues you’re struggling with?
5. The recent revelation of his father’s betrayal of his mother has been the biggest blow to Chris’s faith. How has the hypocrisy of Christians made it harder for you to believe in Jesus?
6. Where do you stand in your relationship with God right now? What are your hopes for your spiritual life in the years ahead?

## *Chapter 2*

1. Chris has begun drinking too much. Do you think drifting from biblical faith tends to lead to drifting from biblical standards of morality—or is it the other way around? Or is there no particular connection between belief and behavior? Give your opinion.
2. Chris loves his grandfather and sees him as a wise older man he can unburden his doubts to. How have your relationships with Christians affected your faith in God for the better or the worse?
3. Do you like to read theology? If so, how have these studies influenced your relationship with God?
4. Gil, Ronald, and Chris debate balance and passion. Do you enjoy discussing controversial issues with others, or are you more likely to avoid a topic that stirs up disagreement? Why?
5. What risks or benefits do you see in people being passionate about what they believe about God?

## *Chapter 3*

1. Gil is making the most of his homebound state by enjoying what he can see from his window. Do you like to take time to be still and simply observe nature and people, or do you feel that you are too busy to do that much? How can taking time to just be still enrich you as a person?

2. Gil tells Chris, “You’ve got an open door to talk to me anytime. About anything.” How good are you at listening in a receptive way to the doubts or worries of others? How could you get better at this?
3. If there was a time when you consciously committed your life to Jesus, describe how it happened.
4. Gil says, “Almost everyone I’ve led to Christ...thought...that the point of Christianity was ‘being good.’” Do you also tend to equate being a Christian with “being good”? If that’s not what following Jesus is really about, what *is* it about?
5. Who is Jesus to you?
6. When have you most strongly felt the love of God?

#### *Chapter 4*

1. As Chris shovels the snow, Gil’s line of questioning reveals his concerns about Chris’s reasons for undertaking religious studies. What are the risks of studying God and the Scriptures impersonally, as if they were mere academic subjects?
2. How does studying theology to *know God* differ from studying theology to *know about Him*?
3. Gil says, “An open mind is like an open mouth. It’s meant to close on something.” Do you agree or disagree, and why?

4. Do you tend to look at truth as absolute or relative? What's your reason for this?
5. Do you agree or disagree with the common idea that all religions are different roads that lead to the same God? How would you defend your view to someone who took the other side?

#### *Chapter 5*

1. In his grief over the loss of his wife, Gil finds comfort in reading the Bible. When and how do you read the Bible? What role does it play in your life?
2. Have you ever had an experience similar to Chris's experience of the presence of God on the night of the jam session at age thirteen? If so, tell about it.
3. After the mountaintop experience of feeling the presence of God at Gil's house, Chris descended into the valley when his parents separated. What experiences in your life have shaken your belief in God?
4. What's your attitude toward the Christian church? When have you experienced real Christian community, and when have you experienced fake Christian community?
5. In his sermon to the young people, Gil warned them of the dangers of going along with the crowd. How

has your desire to be liked and accepted by others influenced your religious beliefs or your spiritual practice?

6. What do you think Gil means when he says, “The world says, ‘Be true to yourself.’ King Jesus says, ‘Be true to your future self’”? Give an example from your life of a time when you were faced with that choice.

### *Chapter 6*

1. Gil is reading the church father Augustine. Who are your favorite spiritual writers? How have they influenced you?
2. Gil’s breakfast prayer, borrowed from Augustine, says, “We tasted You, and we feel nothing but hunger and thirst for You.” How would you describe your hunger for God—are you ravenous or only mildly hungry, or something in between?
3. Do you evangelize? If so, how do you do it?
4. What do you like or not like about evangelism?
5. Are you more like Chris, inclined to see all religions as equal, none superior to the others? Or are you more like Gil, certain that Christianity is in a whole different category from other religions? Explain.

6. Gil says, “Failure to evangelize is almost always a worship problem.... Whenever you are completely taken with something or someone, you can’t help but talk about it.” If your passion for Jesus were stronger, how might that affect what you say to others about Him and how you say it?

### *Chapter 7*

1. Gil is plainly unhappy about having to live with the effects of his stroke. What is one disappointment God has allowed into your life that you are tempted to be bitter toward Him about?
2. Are there any blots upon the history of Christianity, such as the Crusades, that make it hard for you to be a Christian? Explain.
3. Chris sums up a part of his grandfather’s argument when he says, “So you’re saying my criticism of the church is Christian criticism.” How might your criticism of the church be “Christian criticism”?
4. Does your awareness of your own failings make you less likely to condemn others’ failings—or more likely? Why?
5. Gil is hoping his health will improve. Chris is wondering if his faith can come back to life. The chickadee revives after appearing to die. What sin or failure or weakness in your own life would you most like to be healed of if you could?

## Chapter 8

1. Katy and her fellow youth group members rebelled against what they had been taught at church by going along with the “different winds” that were blowing in the 1970s. If you had a Christian upbringing, how have you rebelled against it?
2. What’s your opinion on whether God approves of homosexuality or not?
3. Do you have a “Chase” in your life? (Or are *you* “Chase”?) If so, how has this affected your attitude toward homosexuality?
4. How would you like to see Christian churches treat homosexuals differently?
5. What kinds of pressures do you think there will be on Christians as society’s view of homosexuality changes?
6. Give an example of one time in your life when you became acutely aware of your need to repent—turn from your sin and turn toward Jesus. What brought you to that point?

## Chapter 9

1. The phone call from Chris’s dad reopens his most painful wound. Describe a time when you found it hard to forgive someone who had hurt you. What did that situation do to your relationship with God?

2. What is it about your relationship with God that you would like others to pray for, just as Gil intercedes in prayer for Chris?
3. Chris heads to a bar, planning to get drunk, when he doesn't want to forgive his dad. For him, drinking has become a form of escape. What form of escape do you tend to go to?
4. What do you believe about hell?
5. Who do you need to forgive right now? Who do you need to seek forgiveness from?

### *Chapter 10*

1. Gil has reached a point where he no longer sees his career as the most important thing in his life. What gives your life significance?
2. It's been a few months since the loss of Frances, and Gil is still deep in mourning. Who are the loved ones you have lost to death? How has their loss changed you?
3. At the cemetery, Gil hopes that a reminder of the brevity of life will move Chris to start living again for King Jesus. Do you feel a sense of urgency about resolving your spiritual questions, or are you content living with the uncertainty? Why?

4. What do you believe happens to people after death?
5. “Tears and laughter today,” Gil says. “Only laughter tomorrow.” What have been some of the “tears and laughter” in your life lately?

### *Chapter 11*

1. The party Chris has arranged for Gil is a kind of foretaste of heaven. And heaven, of course, is the “laughter tomorrow” Gil had spoken of. Which joys of life seem like foretastes of heaven to you?
2. The group around the piano sings, “Come, and make all things new; build up this ruined earth, restore our faded Paradise, Creation’s second birth.” What are you looking forward to about heaven?
3. In what ways have your beliefs changed since you started reading this book?
4. What questions or doubts are you still hoping to resolve?
5. What blessing could you share with someone else?