

Truth Dare

Dare to Live the
Truth You Believe

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TruthDare: Dare to Live the Truth You Believe

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Introduction

Truth . . . and Dare

I went out to dinner this weekend with a close friend whose life is so full of pain, it nauseates me at times. She has an eleven-year-old daughter who was born with brain abnormalities and will never function past the capabilities of a six-month-old baby. This requires my friend to be a 24-7 caregiver, which, needless to say, is emotionally and physically exhausting. She also has a teenage son who struggles with depression, and suicide is a real and ongoing concern for this boy. If this wasn't enough, she has three brothers who sold their late father's company a few years ago and, consumed by greed and self-justifications, managed to exclude her from their family's inheritance.

This is what my friend wakes up to every morning. But guess what my friend did when we were out for dinner? She knew I was having a rough bout with my own hormonal teenage son, so she bought me a gift and paid for the meal. Never mind that the pain in her life renders her to a heap on the bathroom floor. Never mind that worry over her son keeps her from getting a full night of sleep. My friend's heart aches much of the time. Yet she took me out to dinner and bought me a present.

My friend—in spite of the odds and injustices stacked against her—embraces the truth of God and dares to live it. Not that she doesn't have it out with God on occasion, because she does. But at the end of the day her pain and questions don't trump her faith. *TruthDare* is filled with men and women like my friend—people who have taken God at His word in spite of their circumstances, questions, feelings, and fears. This book is also born out of a hunger deep inside my soul. Most of my life I've wanted more of God. I've craved a deeper, mountain-moving faith, yet I never seem to get where I yearn to be. I want all of God that my humanness can take—an abandoned Jesus-centered life, trusting Him with every detail and knowing myself as His beloved.

But how?

One way I've found to inch toward this place is through God's stories. When I was a child, I was given a collection of books on martyrs and strong people of faith. I remember reading their stories and even as a little girl having the flame of my own faith fueled. I'm an avid believer in the faith-breathing impact of real-life stories that tell about the messy stuff in life. I think they take us "farther up and further in" to God, as C. S. Lewis put it in *The Last Battle*.

My friend Carol trains women at her church how to share their stories. In her training, she describes how stories have the power to make God and faith more real to us. As a college psychology teacher, I share with my students how our brains are wired to retain and remember information we can emotionally connect with. It's no wonder then that God is an avid storyteller. Jesus used stories to illustrate His teachings because He wanted us to connect with and remember what He taught us. And God's stories don't end with the Scriptures but are timeless and pervasive, continuously being told all around us.

Inside this book you'll find people who unknowingly have moved me closer to God by sharing from their own barren, disappointed, and confused places. Their stories are also filled with grace, triumph,

and celebration. These men and women have grappled with everyday messes as well as life-altering events and found their way closer to God. Coming to Him with humble and hungry hearts, they have uncovered and rejected lies in their lives and have sought to listen to the One whose voice inspires them to dare to live His Word.

As I grow closer to God, I see myself as a tiny inchworm crossing the desert, and these stories nourish me on my long, slow journey. So in each chapter I weave in pieces of my own story, sharing personal struggles and discoveries as my heart hungers to live this *TruthDare*.



Remember

God is real. See the proof.

Do this to remember me.

LUKE 22:19 (NLT)

In the nearly thirty years I've believed that Jesus is who He said He is, I've passed through many hallways of doubt. I've asked all the same questions I'm now asked as a neighborhood Bible study leader. Many times I have no answers for the questions I'm asked. And the truth is, at this point in my spiritual journey, I'm scared of people who seem to have all the answers. Clean, logical, cut-and-dried answers often make me uncomfortable. One woman in our study had memorized practically the whole Bible, and whenever someone asked a vulnerable question such as, "Why would God allow my sister's baby to be born deformed?" this woman would pull out some verse from the Bible about trust, or God's goodness, or the sanctification process. She meant well but I always cringed when she gave her answers.

For me a lot of real life doesn't make sense or have a simplistic spiritual answer. Besides, as far as I can tell, almost every person chosen

by God in the Bible to lead others had questions, doubts, and a need for reassurance. I want to fall into the same category as them. Not the Bible Answer Man.

Jesus' disciple Thomas is known as "the doubter," but I've always wondered how John the Baptist—whom Jesus called the greatest man who ever lived—scooted through history, never being dubbed a doubter. He spent his whole life following the call God had given him—to prepare the way for the Messiah. Then, when Jesus came to John while he was baptizing people in the river, John saw "the Spirit of God descending like a dove" onto Jesus, and he heard a voice from heaven say, "This is my Son, whom I love" (Matt. 3:16–17). After John saw and heard this spectacular event, he told anyone who would listen that Jesus was THE ONE—the Messiah who would save them.

He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid?
Do you still have no faith?"

MARK 4:40

Yet, when John was thrown into prison a short time later, he began to have doubts. What he had seen and heard by the river became blurred. John wanted reassurance so he sent friends to go to Jesus and double-check with him. "Are you actually THE ONE?" Just sort of a last ditch, double-triple check. I love what Jesus tells John's friends: "Tell him what you have seen and heard" (see Luke 7:22). Basically, Jesus was jogging John's memory: "John, remember. Remember what you saw and heard. Remember what happened by the river . . . you can't see it now but it's still real . . . it's true . . . remember."

I relate to John in his moment of crisis because I'm prone to forgetting. And when I forget, my thoughts can go dark too. I start wondering why God allows mothers to die while their children are still

young. That kills me. I wonder about how He can stand to watch a little girl go hungry. I wonder about the little children who drowned when He flooded the earth. I volunteer at our local hospice and I watch people in horrific agony as they die, and I wonder, “Why God? Why does it have to be so awful?”

My good friend Ray, who is a theologian, explains these unexplainable things to his students using an analogy he calls the “Thin Man.” On a napkin he draws a stick figure and holds it up. “The Thin Man is only two-dimensional,” he explains. “He can see only from his limited two-dimensional world. But what if he were able to step out of the napkin and step into our three-dimensional world? He’d be able to see things he never knew were there. Mr. Thin Man would perceive and understand so much more if he were able to become three-dimensional.”

His point is that we are like Mr. Thin Man. We’re stuck. We’re only three-dimensional. There’s so much reality beyond our realm that we can’t see, understand, or comprehend.

According to Ray’s friend Dave, who is a brilliant physicist, when time and space were created, the universe shrunk from seven dimensions to three dimensions. What would life be like in seven dimensions? When I think of it this way, 1 Corinthians 2:9 is given a lot more meaning: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”

But even though the Mr. Thin Man analogy makes sense, the fact is we still exist in this pain-saturated, three-dimensional space. The older I get, the more acutely I’m aware of the multitude of hurting people all around me. Sometimes when I’m thinking dark thoughts, I wonder when my time for soul-wrenching pain will come. Is it just around the corner? Is my daughter’s headache a brain tumor?

When I go dark like John in prison, I begin questioning if what I believe is really real. When talking to someone doesn’t help and my heart is so broken about a friend’s marriage hitting rock bottom or an atrocity that just happened in the world, I retreat downstairs and sit

on the couch where I spend my mornings with God. Somehow, if I force myself to bare my heartache and doubts and questions to Him, He meets me. I mostly don't get answers but I do get balm. Soothing, healing balm over my unsteady heart. And often the balm is a gentle reminder to remember.

When I begin to remember, my thoughts slowly shift from dark and questioning to Jesus by the river. But my river experience isn't a dove or a voice from above. It's a six-year-old boy named Oliver.

.....

"My tummy hurts." Three-year-old Oliver held his stomach and looked up at his parents, Molly and Tom, with tears rolling down his face.

At first Molly hadn't been concerned about Oliver's stomachache, but now as she looked at her son's face, she knew something was wrong.

Molly and Tom prayed as they drove Oliver to the emergency room. At the hospital, a young doctor examined Oliver, looking down his throat and into his ears and poking and prodding all around his abdomen. Looping his stethoscope around his neck, the doctor patted Oliver's shoulder. "He's constipated. Go home and feed him lots of fiber and he'll be better in a couple of days." Relieved, Molly and Tom stopped by the grocery store on the way home and loaded up on Metamucil wafers and mineral oil.

But the constipation remedies didn't work. When they took Oliver back to the doctor's office, they were instructed to give him enemas to help with his discomfort. But still little Oliver kept crying day after day with pain. Finally, after six weeks and every constipation remedy they could discover, Molly and Tom were back in the emergency room for the third time.

"We're not leaving here until the doctors figure out what's wrong,"

Tom told their emergency room nurse, Ursula. His face was drawn tight as he held Oliver's little hand.

After Ursula gave Oliver two enemas herself and had no success, she agreed something more had to be done. The doctors ordered blood tests and an ultrasound and had Oliver admitted to the hospital for further testing.

Molly and Tom helped Oliver get settled in his room and were thankful when a nurse brought in *The Little Mermaid* movie, which distracted Oliver for the moment. When the phone rang later that afternoon, Molly leaned over in her chair next to Oliver's bed and answered it. "Hello."

Tom watched Molly from a chair on the other side of Oliver's bed.

"Yes . . . Uh-huh." Molly nodded. "Oh," her voice went flat. "Okay . . ."

"What is he saying? What?" Tom tried to whisper but it came out more like a shout vibrating off the white, sterile walls.

Molly held up her hand, motioning him to wait, but he pushed ahead. "What is he telling you?"

Molly slowly set down the phone. Bewildered, she looked at Tom. "He was telling me Oliver has cancer."

Time stopped. The room grew small as they both looked down at Oliver curled up in the hospital bed. *Cancer? Oliver? No. That can't be.*

Thirty minutes later Tom and Molly sat at a long rectangular table in a hospital meeting room with pediatric oncologists and both sets of their parents. Molly sat on one side of the table with her mom and dad, and Tom sat on the other side of the table with his mom and dad. The head physician of the pediatric cancer department calmly read the test results to them and explained that Oliver had neuroblastoma, a rare form of childhood cancer with a low survival rate. Molly and Tom locked eyes across the table as the doctor reviewed the results. The unspoken emotions of their nightmare settled over the room like a dark cloud.

The doctor explained there was a mass on Oliver's adrenal gland, and the cancer had already spread extensively throughout his small, thirty-three-pound body. He explained how they would fight it. He made it clear it would be a long, horrendous, uphill battle that needed to begin immediately.

Two days later Oliver had surgery to remove the cancerous mass. The following day he began chemotherapy. The intrusive procedures were unending for Oliver. Most of the really painful procedures took place in the hospital's infamous fourth-floor Treatment Room. The sterile, windowless room had a single stainless steel bed surrounded by tubes, syringes, straps, and monitors. Each time Oliver had a bone aspiration, he would walk bravely through the double white doors into the Treatment Room and crawl up onto the uninviting bed. Molly or Tom would get up on the bed too and lay down with him. Oliver would roll over on his side and press his nose against the nose of one of his parents while technicians drove the five-inch needle into the small of his back. As they lie there, facing each other nose-to-nose, Oliver's big brown eyes would pierce into the eyes of his mom or dad, drinking in the strength he needed to get through it.

After weeks of chemotherapy, it was time for the bone-marrow transplant. Oliver flew to California with his parents to begin a grueling three-month treatment. Molly and Tom lived at the Ronald McDonald House for families while Oliver resided in a highly sterilized, positive airflow room in the Los Angeles Children's Hospital. To enter Oliver's special room, Molly and Tom would step into a square "sterile zone" and pull on a sterilized plastic suit that zipped up from the inside. Next, they put on two sets of gloves and finally a full face and head covering so only their eyes were showing. Oliver had little physical contact with anyone during this time, including the nurses who took care of him by using special arm inserts that went through the wall into his room. For more than six weeks, Molly and Tom could not touch or kiss their very sick little boy.

Finally, the day came when Oliver's blood count was up to seven hundred, the magical number allowing physical contact with him. Molly burst into Oliver's room, stripped him down to his diaper, and softly touched his skin all over. Tummy, back, legs, arms—she drank him up with her hands while Oliver rolled all around and giggled.

With each day Oliver grew stronger, and after twelve agonizing weeks the doctors released him to go home. Life slowly resumed to normal. Oliver's hair grew back, and in the fall he started kindergarten. He loved cowboys and fire trucks and fought with his little brother and sister. Life was good again.

One October evening a year and a half later, while Tom was out of town, Molly took the kids to McDonald's to play and eat dinner. The next morning she noticed Oliver was limping. *He must have hurt himself in the ball pit*, she thought while scrambling eggs for the children. When she mentioned his limp to her mom on the phone, they both dismissed it as nothing. Later that afternoon a spasm of panic shot through Molly as she watched her firstborn son shuffle across the kitchen favoring one leg. *The cancer is back*. She stood frozen, her eyes glued to Oliver. When he looked over at her, she forced a smile.

"I'm gonna go call Daddy," she said, injecting a false cheerful note into her voice. In her bedroom she sank onto the bed, a burning sensation filling her chest like a balloon. She tried Tom's number but there was no answer. Crushing loneliness poured over her. If the cancer was back, there were no more medical options for Oliver. "Tom," she whispered, clutching her face in her hands, "call home." A thick fog enveloped her as she walked into the bathroom and locked the door. There, she fell to her knees as sob after sob rose up from her throat. *No. Please, God. No.*

A few weeks later, tests confirmed what they already knew in their hearts. Oliver only had a short time left to live.

Even though grief consumed their hearts, Molly and Tom were

resolved to live big while Oliver was still alive. They went to Disney World, drove around their city in a real fire truck, flew in a twin-engine airplane, and spent lazy days just being together at their country farm. Oliver slept nestled between Molly and Tom every night. He woke up when his brothers and sister climbed into the bed, begging for breakfast. And, although he was often in pain, he always let his new baby brother, Patrick, crawl all over him.

The doctors and specialists advised Molly and Tom not to talk about dying until Oliver brought it up. They suggested it was best to follow his lead. They also suggested Molly and Tom have a plan for what they wanted to do when the end came. Did they want to be alone or with family? Did they want their other children present or at a neighbor's house? As much as they yearned for a miracle, Molly and Tom heeded this advice and talked through these questions.

Gradually, Oliver began to weaken and the pain intensified. He began to use his morphine pump continuously, which caused him to sleep day and night. A nurse came to their house every morning to monitor Oliver's pulse and breathing. She explained that as his body shut down, his vision would go too. A few short weeks after Oliver celebrated his sixth birthday, the nurse came in the morning as usual to check his vital signs. Turning to Molly and Tom, she hesitated for a moment, and then spoke: "It will happen today. He will die within the next several hours."

Molly walked to the phone and began to call their family. Always surrounded by lots of people, Molly and Tom had more than thirty of their family and friends sitting in their living room that day while Oliver lay on their couch. Molly sat on the couch holding Oliver in her arms, while Tom sat to the side, stroking his little boy's hair. Oliver still had never talked to his mom or dad about dying and, during the past week, he'd hardly moved or spoken at all. But that afternoon, all of a sudden, his big brown eyes opened and he began talking. At first he began chatting about cowboys, one of his favorite topics. The whole

room smiled as he talked. Then a curious look washed over his face. “Mom, Dad who are they? Are they good guys or bad guys?” Molly and Tom looked at each other. Even though his vision had already deteriorated, they knew Oliver was seeing something they couldn’t see. Tom leaned in close to Oliver. “Oh buddy, they’re the good guys.” He ran his fingers through Oliver’s hair. “Definitely the good guys.”

Oliver was quiet for a long moment. Then he whispered, “I see Jesus. He wants me to come with Him.” Keeping his eyes fixed on what he saw, Oliver said to one of his favorite uncles, “Uncle Matt, come with me.” Matt crossed the room and came to Oliver’s side. He held Oliver’s hand. “It’s okay, Oliver, you can go now, and I’ll come later.” Gently he squeezed his hand. “It’s okay.”

Oliver was quiet. The clock on the wall ticked, James Taylor music played softly in the background, and the room held muted sounds of prayer. Then, miraculously, Oliver sat up. He hadn’t been able to move himself for weeks. His arms reached out in front of him and opened up as if someone were about to hold him. Then in his little voice he said, “Hi, Jesus.”

A moment later he lay back down. As Molly held him, his little heart beat for a few more minutes, but she knew he was already gone. And she knew where he was. He had just told them.

.....

Oliver’s dad, Tom, is my cousin. And Oliver’s story is what Jesus often reminds me to remember. It’s part of my river experience. Just like John knew he saw a dove and heard a voice, I know a six-year-old can’t manufacture his dying experience for the benefit of others. With a cloud of witnesses, Oliver testified to Christ. And when I remember Oliver being lifted into the unseen arms of my unseen Jesus, it makes the realness of another kingdom, another world, another reality more real to me right now.

Oliver's entrance into heaven is what I need to remember when I'm stuck in my three-dimensional world and my vision becomes blurred. It's what I hold on to when doubts shade my heart. It's what I go back to when confusion from this world takes the reins of my thinking.

I know I'm in good company of needing a reminder to remember. At least I know the Twelve around the table needed a good reminder. Jesus gave them tactile props to help them remember too—a broken loaf of bread and a cup of wine. He held them up, looked around the table, and said, "Remember . . ."

He told them to remember because He knew how easy it was going to be for them to forget. He told them to remember because, though He wouldn't be with them in body any longer, He was still real. Real. He's real.

Remember.

Reflections

- t What is an area in your life where you struggle with doubt? Where do you go and what do you do when you are grappling with spiritual doubts?
