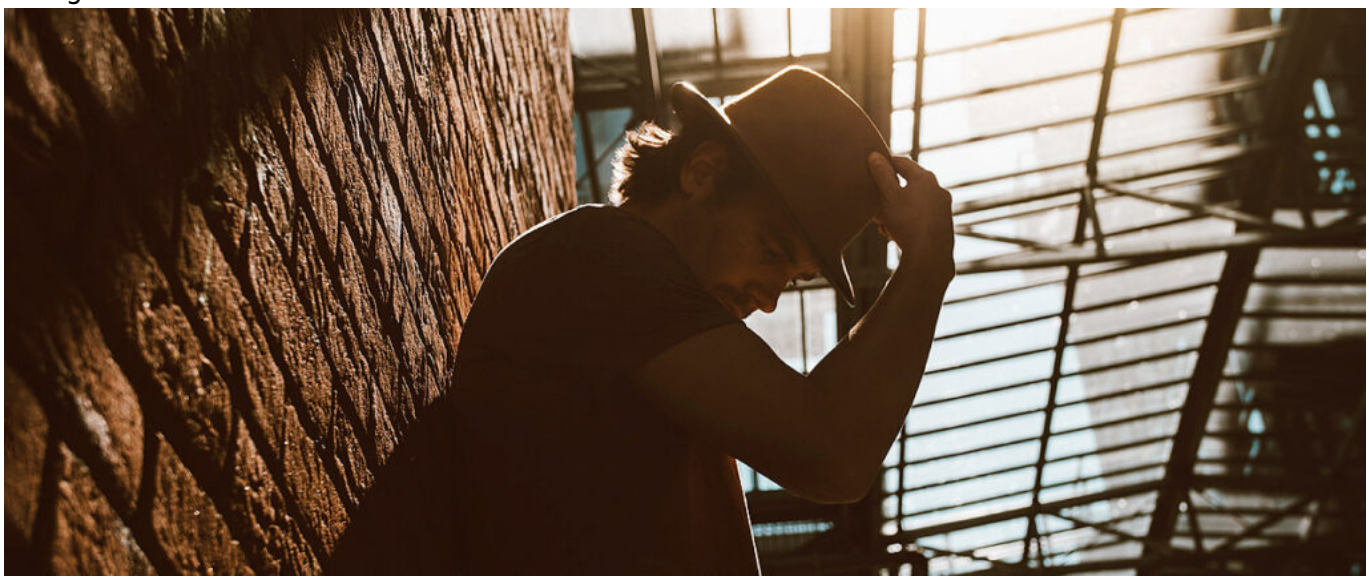
Kissing Jesus Goodbye

1 August 2019



In my early twenties, I was drowning. I had desires. I knew what God's commands were, but I didn't like them and I didn't want to follow them anymore. I fell in love. I fell in lust. I dated. I crossed boundaries. I hurt people. I dishonoured God.

> ..I then began to look for ways to do things on God's terms.

I'm so grateful that our stories don't have to end there. I woke up in the midst of my rebellion against God and realised I'd squandered my inheritance in a far country. And, just like the son in Jesus' famous parable, I found the Father waiting with open arms. My whole life took a different course and I then began to look for ways to do things on God's terms. At that point, a book had been in print for almost ten years already, had hit the best-sellers list and begun to shape the way many young Christians viewed singleness, dating and marriage. It was called 'I Kissed Dating Goodbye', and its author, Joshua Harris, was a 21-year-old youth pastor when he'd written it.

Higher Loyalty To A Holy God

The book was popular for a reason. Sure, some of it was slightly idealistic and some of it was slightly legalistic, but most of it was an unapologetic call for Christians to live differently to the rest of the world. Harris rejected the idea that we should simply conduct ourselves in our romantic relationships the way everyone else does. He called for a higher loyalty to the God of holiness. He used old-fashioned words like 'courting', endorsed the idea of young men and women getting to know each other in groups and spoke about lust like it was something to be feared, not indulged. He grieved over the rampant divorce statistics among the people of God, and mapped out a way that young Christians could serve God wholeheartedly whether they were single, in a relationship, engaged or married.

> They weren't just books. They were a revolution.

I began to see a life that was possible when I got rid of my compromise and approached romantic relationships with self-restraint and a desire to get rid of sin, not excuse it. I saw that the results were healthy. And I got the sense that the author – this young man, across an ocean, who was so desperate to serve God wholeheartedly in his generation – was someone who hated the corrupt ways of this world and loved the righteousness of God. His follow-up book, 'Boy Meets Girl', was the story of meeting, courting and marrying his wife while running this race of personal holiness and self-control. They weren't just books. They were a revolution.

Holiness Meets Fire

But the world was also undergoing its own revolution. It's difficult to describe the speed with which culture (and the church) around us has thrown off the constraints of God's holiness over the last twenty years. Harris' books had called people to a radical (in other words, Biblical) purity, and as the world underwent one sexual revolution after another, the concepts he laid out seemed more and more archaic. What simply seemed old-fashioned started to look oppressive; what once seemed aspirational started to appear completely unreasonable. God's standards hadn't changed – the world's tolerance for holiness had changed. In the interim, Harris led a church for almost a decade, stepping down in 2015 to become a student and broaden his views. And that's when the warning signs started to appear.

The Atonement

In November of 2017, TEDx Talks posted a seventeen-minute video titled 'Strong Enough to Be Wrong'. In the video, Joshua Harris addressed a darkened auditorium of people who didn't seem to know much about his past as a best-selling Christian author. He used words like "misguided", "re-evaluating" and "mistakes". He admitted that a book he'd written twenty years before had hurt many people, and he was seeking to make amends. But something felt wrong. Was he really dismissing the entire thing as an error in judgment? What about the majority of it, which was simply using the Bible to encouraging holiness? And who was he seeking out for perspective as he evaluated his book's legacy? This group of strangers? People who were offended by his book? What about all those who had their lives changed, preserved, blessed by his bold call for purity?

And most of all, where exactly was he going with all of this?

The Retraction

Time would soon tell. Harris set out on a journey to track down people hurt by his book, and he let them set him straight. He filmed it and made a movie, called 'I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye'. It was as if he was interviewing victims of a massive human rights tragedy, not people who'd read a challenging, counter-cultural book. And one by one, person by person, he let people tell him where and how he'd gone wrong. Something was fundamentally misplaced about this approach. This was more than just someone revisiting the ill-advised zeal of their youth. This was someone who'd shifted the goalposts to align with a changed culture.

The Capitulation

On July 18 he posted a photo to Instagram. It was of him and his wife, side by side, strange expressions on their faces. They were separating.

On July 25, another post. Joshua Harris stated that he is no longer a Christian.

So many modern worship songs are infatuated with the idea that God will never give up on us, but

few people know how to deal with someone giving up on God. Try to imagine someone you love – a leader, friend, mentor, pastor – openly turning their back on Jesus. Not just a moral failing or a slippery theological diversion or an abandoning of the church, but a public renouncing of Jesus. The shock has been seismic. The mainstream media has pounced on the story with glee. 'The American author of a bestselling Christian guide to relationships for young people has announced that his marriage is over and he has lost his faith,' crowed The Guardian. 'On Friday, Joshua Harris, a former pastor and author, wrote on Instagram that he no longer considers himself Christian,' wrote *Business Insider*. 'Joshua Harris, a former pastor who wrote a relationship book, says his marriage is over and he is no longer Christian,' said CNN's headline. His Wikipedia page was updated immediately. The media, which paradoxically mocks chastity, abstinence and purity at the same time as it erupts in fury over sexual abuse, is delighted at the irony of it all. It's like catnip to them: Another nail in the coffin of old-fashioned self-control, boundaries, marriage and godliness.

And at the center of it all is one confused, former pastor taking his cue not from the Bible but from the world around him.

> You are going to see people who fought in the trenches, for truth, come under a powerful delusion because they looked for the approval of man, not God.

This is not a scathing take-down of Joshua Harris. I love that man. I've never met him, but I feel like he was a friend to me through my struggles to live a life worthy of the gospel. He needs prayer, not vitriol. He has friendships with many godly people, and no doubt they will be trying their best to speak to him of sin, righteousness and the judgment to come. He's taken his eyes off Jesus and been deceived by the god of this age – the one promising him enlightenment and truth. But he is exchanging the truth of God for a lie. My heart is desperately sad for him. I almost feel overcome with sorrow to think of the path he is choosing and how he will unwittingly entice others to stumble. I think of something Paul was genuinely afraid of – that '*after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.'* (1 Corinthians 9:27)

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No Compromise

No, this is not a takedown of Joshua Harris. This is about you, the person reading these words. You are going to see people around you – some obscure, some famous, some expected, some unexpected – abandoning the ways of God and then abandoning God Himself. You are going to see people falling away. You are going to see people dismiss the devotion of their earlier years with an irritated wave of the hand. You are going to see people describe their rebellion as being liberated, growing up, being set free, waking up, coming alive. You are going to hear Christianity spoken about as though it were an abuse people endured, a deception they escaped, a brainwashing they managed to undo. You are going to witness people continue to change Jesus into an unrecognisable abstraction, and then they will simply abandon Him like a childhood toy they outgrew. You are going to see people who fought in the trenches, for truth, come under a powerful delusion because they looked for the approval of man, not God.

'But you, man of God,' said Paul to Timothy after describing the chaos brought about by false

teachers, *'flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.'* (1 Timothy 6:11-12)

> But you, don't fear being in the minority, because throughout history the true people of God have always been in the minority.

But you, stand firm. But you, don't give up. But you, find your bearings from the Word of God, not the Internet. But you, take courage. But you, spur others on. But you, keep your eyes on eternity. But you, look to that Day when Jesus will reward those who have run to the end. But you, don't abandon the ways of God. But you, don't give up on His purity, His holiness. But you, don't throw away your confidence. But you, don't fear being in the minority, because throughout history the true people of God have always been in the minority. But you, keep running your race.

Joshua Harris may yet return to the one true God. I pray it'll happen soon. There have been many who have compromised and turned away from Him throughout history, and there will be many more before this world is done. But we will fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. What is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. The world around us will keep changing, but God and His ways never will.