

Case Study: From Atheism to Christianity—Mike Arnold

Apologetics - Defending and Declaring the Evidence for Biblical Christianity

"15 ...if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it [Greek - "apologia"]. 16 But do this in a gentle and respectful way..." 1 Peter 3:15-16 NLT

The following story is from **The Side B Podcast** of Dr. Jana Harmon, October 28, 2020. Adapted for this Bible study.

"My brother's death made me an angry atheist. But kindness made me a Christian." - Mike Arnold

Many things cause people to question God's existence. Suffering in the world is often a key factor. This was the case for Mike Arnold who lost his faith at the age of seven. Mike lives in England. Jana Harmon, whose Ph.D. research is in the conversion of adults from atheism to Christianity. She interviewed Mike and shares his story of losing his faith and then rediscovering it years later.



"My mom and dad used to send us to Sunday school to get us out of the house, so I went to Sunday school for about six months. They wanted some peace and quiet because there were four of us—my two brothers and my sister. We went to Sunday school where we learned that Jesus loved us. But when I was 7 years old, we experienced a house fire and

my younger brother didn't get out of the house. He died of smoke poisoning.

"And I remember my 11-year-old brother walking out of the house and he was on fire. And they put him out, put him in the ambulance, and I sat at his feet. I was sent to church the week after and the minister said: 'Come and we will pray' and I ran away. I said: 'If that is what God has done to my brother, then I don't want anything to do with it and I became an atheist.

"My younger brother survived for five days and then died. He had third-degree burns over 90 percent of his body and it was probably a blessing that he did die. But I could have nothing to do with religion. I became an atheist."

Q1. In your own words, summarize why Mike became an atheist? In your opinion, what are some of the most common reasons people reject religion? Why do you think people blame God for tragedy?

Q2. As a seven-year-old, Mike saw his brother on fire. How deeply do you think such an experience would be embedded in anyone's memory? Are there any past painful experiences embedded in your memory?

Angry With God

Mike continued: *"If there is a God if he is so powerful and benevolent, why does all of this rubbish happen? Those are the weapons I would use to shut down or disarm Christians or other religious people. I wouldn't bother with anything religious at all. Wouldn't go to a church whether it be a funeral, even though it would be a huge insult to the family. I would stand outside. I wouldn't go. If someone was getting married in the church I would stand outside. I wouldn't go into the church. I was just not interested at all.*

Q3. What did Mike say was his weapon for arguing with religious people? How would you respond to Mike?

Mike continued: *"As far as I was concerned it was all rubbish. And I was not slow in telling people that's what I thought. That's how anti-religious, in particular to Christianity, I was. I saw Christians as very judgmental who wouldn't listen to anything I would try to say. They would just shoot me down. 'We'll pray for you.' And that would be it. I don't want them to pray for me. Don't even try praying for me. Whenever I encountered religious people... I would argue with them. That's how I lived my life until I was 26.*

Q4. How did Mike view the reaction of Christians to his disbelief in God? When have you been superficially treated by Christians?

Q5. For how long had Mike been bitter? How deeply did his anger and pain affect him?

Mike became a hardcore atheist. He believed atheism was the intellectually superior view. No one could convince him otherwise. But then the unexpected happened, Mike's agnostic wife became a Christian. Her newfound belief in God only added to Mike's anger.

Mike added: *"Her whole personality had changed. She was far more upbeat, happier, her whole countenance. She was far more smiley. She was not as argumentative, not as assertive. It was like being married to a total stranger. It caused an awful lot of problems for us. She used to go off to prayer meetings and church and she would walk right back into an argument. It nearly broke our marriage. It was that way for about nine months."*

Q6. Why is it difficult for a marriage relationship when one person becomes a Christian and the other does not?

Mike anticipated a heated exchange when he met his wife's Christian friends for the first time. Instead, he was surprised by their warm hospitality and genuine friendship. He felt valued by them. His anger began to deflate like a popped balloon.

Mike stated: "One night I came home from work around midnight and she called from a friend's house asking if I could come get her. By the time I got there, I was absolutely seething. Had anyone mentioned Jesus, I would have lashed out at them. I was mad, fuming. I wasn't interested in what they had to say, I just wanted to shoot them down in flames.

"I was ready for it...I walked in where she was with a couple of Christians and they asked: 'Would you like a cup of coffee?' and it immediately disarmed me. I wasn't expecting it. I was ready to erupt. They offered me a cup of coffee and they sat there and talked to me like I mattered. And they didn't talk about God or Jesus. They just talked to me like I was human. They welcomed me into their home. They listened to what I was saying."

Q7. What did his wife's friends do to make a difference in Mike's attitudes towards Christians? What does this show us about how to relate to nonbelievers?

Colossians 4:5-6 NLT *"5 Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. 6 Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone."*

Q8. What does Paul say about how Christians should relate to nonbelievers? How does this compare to the way the Christians related to Mike?

The Journey Back

Mike had few friends. He had alienated himself from anyone religious and from all others. However, the personable, caring conversations with his wife's Christian friends left him wanting more. He said: "I kept going there because I was intrigued by these people who were Christians." Over several weeks, the walls he had built to keep people away, began to erode. He was continually welcomed in love and acceptance.

After a month passed, he started asking them questions. For the next six months, daily, he would talk to them about Jesus, the Bible, Genesis, science, and other issues.

After exhausting all of his questions, his Christian friend said: "What are you holding against God? Would you mind if I prayed for you?" Reluctantly, Mike agreed. But, something profound occurred in and through that prayer. He found the peace that he had never known. Explaining his utter surprise at this turn of events and emotions, Mike said:

"I woke up the next morning and I felt like I was floating on air. I was so peaceful. It was unbelievable. And I went over to try to argue with him and I couldn't. I didn't have any questions. It was a strange thing. After a couple of weeks, he asked how I was doing. I said "I can't explain it. I feel peaceful.' That night, I went home and I said to the Lord: 'If you are there, Will you sort me out?'" That was 18 years ago and I've been a Christian ever since"

Q9. What subjects did Mike discuss with his Christian friends over a six-month period? How did the patience and love of the Christians affect Mike? How did he change?

1 Peter 3:15-16 NLT *"15 Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. 16 But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ."*

Q10. Based on Mike's comments, what would give you the impression that these Christians had some level of apologetics training? How did they demonstrate 1 Peter 3:15-16?

Q11. Why do you think Mike was receptive to prayer from these Christians when he had always been hostile towards it in the past?

Life Change

Mike accepted God's grace and peace. His life was radically changed. Today, Mike serves his town as a community pastor.

Mike explained: "The vast majority of my job is now working with unchurched people—people who have never been in a church before, people who tend to be agnostic. And, I work out of my own experience and my own pain, meeting them where they are and only talking about my faith when they want to."

2 Corinthians 1:4 NLT *"He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us."*

Q12. How does 2 Corinthians 1:4 relate to Mike's ministry to nonbelievers?

Q13. People complain about God allowing suffering in the world. What are some reasons why God may allow suffering?

Q14. What are the biggest lessons you have learned from this case study?

Deep hardness, resentment, and pain can be dissolved with genuine love, compassion, valuing, and care.
