

TRUSTING JESUS

Navigating the Most Common Challenges Grad Students Face

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Trusting Jesus

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INTRODUCTION

Like many of today's graduate students, you may be really confused. You may not have a lot of hope. When you visit an online news website, you see political and racial division, social injustice, and violence being carried out throughout our country and overseas. Deep down, you desire to make a difference in the world and arrived on campus with the intention of contributing to society. But the world seems so messed up. How can one person make a difference?

Whether you're a new graduate student or a sixth-year PhD student, this book will bring hope.

As Christians, we believe that hope springs from a close, personal relationship with Jesus. But staying close to Jesus in the midst of a hectic schedule isn't easy, right? If you're a first-year graduate student taking classes while juggling research, you know what I'm talking about. I labored for two years completing a master's degree in chemical engineering at Georgia Tech, so I understand

the busyness of grad school. I've also been working as a full-time graduate student campus minister for a number of years, and I've walked with many students as they've studied for qualifying exams, attempted and succeeded to get published, and written their dissertations, among other things.

What if I don't belong here? Do I have what it takes? What if I chose the wrong advisor? Have I picked the right career path? What if I fail the qualifying exam and can't get into my PhD program? If these questions haunt your mind at times, you're perfectly normal. These are common fears, insecurities, and wonderings that most grad students face.

While working with students, I've witnessed that their challenges become less daunting as they learn to trust in Jesus, and their ability to healthily cope with the stress makes them more effective as they point others in their departments to Jesus. A quick example that comes

to mind is the story of Andy, a Chinese grad student at Georgia Tech, and his wife, Hua.

I first met Andy when a master's student named Matt Gerber and I found him sitting alone eating lunch in the Georgia Tech student center. We introduced ourselves, discovered that he had just moved from China, and invited him to our small group Bible study. Andy had never explored Christian faith before. He never missed a Bible study that semester, and six months later, he placed his faith in Jesus.

Andy's biggest challenge during his first semester after he had become a Christian was studying for his qualifying exam in mechanical engineering. He had already earned a master's degree from his university in China, so the academic work wasn't too challenging. The real challenge for Andy was speaking, reading, and writing in English. Learning a new language as a student in one of the top engineering schools in the country was extremely difficult.

I'll never forget the conversation I had a few days after Andy took his qualifying exam. When I asked how he felt he had performed on the exam, he said, "Not very well. My advisor is very unhappy with me."

"I'm so sorry to hear that, Andy," I said. "How are you feeling?"

Andy responded, "I'm feeling OK. I prayed about it afterward, and I have a peace about it. My whole life, I've always been stressed out and afraid to fail. For the first

time in my life, I feel that God has a plan for me. I don't know what it is, but I trust that God brought me to the US for a reason and that part of that reason is so that I could come to know Jesus."

Andy's life isn't the only one that was impacted by his trust in Jesus. A month after Andy became a believer, he encouraged Hua to get involved in a women's Bible study for grad students. Shortly after Andy failed his qualifying exam, Hua, seeing God at work in Andy's life, placed her faith in Jesus. Andy switched programs to computer science, earned his master's degree from Georgia Tech, and moved to Baltimore, Maryland, to work as a computer engineer. Andy and Hua had their first child, Annie, in 2020 and their second one, Mia, in November 2021.

Now think about this. Annie and Mia will grow up in a Christian home with parents who knew very little about Jesus before they moved to the United States a few years ago! Jesus not only brought hope into Andy's life; through Andy, Jesus brought hope into Hua's life and the lives of their children.

Whether you're exploring who Jesus is, you're new to studying the Bible, or you've been a Christian for a long time, this book was designed to help you trust Jesus while in grad school. As you can see, this book is divided into six sections that represent the most common issues that Christian students face while in grad school: (1) fear and anxiety, (2) isolation, (3) the imposter syndrome and pride, (4) work-life balance,

(5) grad school relationships, and (6) purpose and meaning in work.

As I organized this book, my desire was to help equip and train you to study God’s Word and to learn how to apply Scripture to your everyday life. With that in mind, we’ve placed a set of questions after each passage of Scripture to help you see its Gospel narrative, discover how the Gospel intersects with your story, and think of others around you who may be struggling with some of the same issues you’ve faced as a grad student.

Trusting Jesus While in Grad School

Trusting in Jesus is a daily process that will help you thrive and not just survive as a grad student. This joy of trusting Jesus is not only something that can be found during your time in grad school; it will also follow you the rest of your life when you look back with fondness at your college days.

As a Christian, your life is not your own. When you first placed your trust in Jesus, you gave Him everything: your career, your education, your family and dating life, and yes, even your hopes and dreams. Trusting in Jesus involves having faith that God’s path for your life is so much better than any you could have chosen on your own.

Christian grad students are so busy that they often forget this, but the Bible tells us this truth over and over again: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the

Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

When Christian grad students embrace the truth that their lives are not their own and have been entrusted to Jesus, they see their departments as a mission field. Pursuing a master’s or doctoral degree is no longer just about furthering your education or preparing you for your career. None of us knows how many more days we might have to live after college. I’m only in my forties as I write this book, but already I’ve had classmates who’ve passed away and have gone to be with the Lord.

Being a Christian grad student is about living in the moment. It’s about knowing God now, worshipping Him, learning more about the world He created, and having genuine relationships with the people around us. Finding time to do all of those in the midst of a busy season of life is hard, but again, that’s what this book is about—providing hope to grad students.

Many students think, “I’ll focus on my relationship with God and reaching others when life slows down and I’m no longer in school.” Here’s the reality, though: Life never slows down, and what you prioritize now will follow you after grad school. If you prioritize work before God, you’ll likely do the same a few years from now. God can help you grow spiritually, walk alongside you during your challenges, and use you to reach others—right now, in one of the busiest times of your life.

Earlier I shared the story of Andy and Hua, who were forever impacted when Andy learned to trust Jesus as a grad student. I asked them to share a few words of encouragement as you begin this study, and this is what they had to say:

Andy: Pursuing a graduate-level degree is not easy for international students. We may feel lonely and desperate when we pursue a better life. But God provides for us a different way to go through this life. This way is free of anxiety and full of peace and joy. After accepting God as my Savior, I feel more peace and strength in my heart. I am more confident to face the uncertainty in the future.

Hua: Staying in the US as a Chinese spouse is not easy. We need to find something to do to fill our life. Thankfully, God guided me to join the grad ministry. I made friends there and learned the Bible with them. As time went by, my spiritual life improved a lot. What's more, God's wisdom and love changed my goal for this life: glorifying God but not pleasing ourselves.

Like Andy and Hua, your future will be impacted by your spiritual growth as a grad student. As you learn to trust Jesus now, it will set you up for a lifetime of trusting Jesus and helping others around you trust in Him as well.

Well, it's almost time to begin section 1, but before you do that, I'd encourage you to read over this next little section, "How to Study Each Passage."

HOW TO STUDY EACH PASSAGE

If you have used the *Encountering Jesus* or the *Following Jesus* grad Bible studies, then this book will look really familiar to you. The questions will be a little different because we are focusing on a different theme. Otherwise, the approach and process will be very similar.

These Bible studies—like *Encountering Jesus* and *Following Jesus*—are designed to engage both your head and your heart. The studies encourage a robust analysis of the passages to help you closely observe what the passage is saying, accurately interpret what the passage means, and fully apply it to your life. God cares about you and has blessed you with a great mind. It's our prayer that these studies will satisfy the intellectual curiosity God has given you and renew your mind. He also cares deeply about your heart. So it's also our prayer that these studies will foster new feelings, attitudes, and affections and will transform your heart.

But most importantly, these studies are designed to connect you more intimately to Jesus. Above all else, God the Father desires for you to know and wholeheartedly follow His Son, Jesus. All of Scripture is telling one story—the story of Jesus and of our need for Him—including the passages covered in these Bible studies. We can't wait for you to discover how each passage points you to Jesus and thus renews your mind and transforms your heart to live out your life in joyful surrender and obedience to Christ, our Savior and King.

For the passage to unearth these treasures, you need to do the work to understand it thoroughly in its original historical context by carefully looking at its grammar, syntax, and context. You will be given the text of each passage we will study. They are printed with wide margins and generous spacing so you can mark them up. By the time you are done, your passage should

be a huge mess of crisscrossed lines, lists of verbs, commands, promises, and circled highlights. Maybe you'll make a list of things that confuse you or diagram a sentence like you did in grammar school. If you slow down and pick the passage apart, you'll be surprised by what you'll see.

Below are some of the connecting words and relationships to look for when you study the passage. Not everything you notice will be significant, but by observing the flow of the text and making note of connections, relationships, repetitions, and so on, it will open itself up to you. Initially, don't worry about drawing conclusions but rather just learn to look and see what the text says. As you do, pray for the Spirit to lead you; what is important will begin to emerge.

CONNECTORS

Contrast: but, even though, much more, nevertheless, yet, although, than, otherwise

Comparison: too, also, and, as, just as, so also, likewise, like

Reason: because, for this purpose, for this reason, for, since

Result: so then, therefore, as a result, thus, then, that, so that, in order that

Time: now, until, when, before, after, while, since

Correlatives: so . . . so also, for . . . as, so . . . as

Condition: if, if . . . then

RELATIONSHIPS

How does this passage relate to what comes before it (and after it)?

Are there things that are alike/different?

Are there things that are repeated?

Is there a progression?

After each passage, there are two pages of questions separated into four columns. We'd encourage you to fill in one column per day, allowing yourself to reflect on the text throughout the week. If you do this, your week will look something like this:

Day One: Profile the Passage

Synthesize the observations you made while marking up the text, and record them in response to the questions in the first column.

Day Two: Expose the Needs

Review the passage again, but this time look deeper to discover and record the needs that the human and divine authors are addressing.

Day Three: Explore the Solution

Review the passage one more time. Look for and record how God meets the needs surfaced in the passage. And then look for and record what makes Jesus the best One to run to for the needs surfaced in the passage.

Day Four: Reflect and Respond

Consider how this passage matters in your life and how the Spirit may be calling you to respond.

Day Five: Meet with Your Bible Study

Finally, meet with your Bible study to share and discuss what you discovered, how God is calling you to respond, and what you will need from Him and the others in your study to do so.

SECTION ONE

Fear and Anxiety

Introduction

In my nineteen years as a full-time campus minister, I've never met a grad student who hasn't struggled with some form of fear and anxiety. There are many circumstances that naturally induce fear and worry: finding the right advisor and project, taking incredibly challenging classes, and the constant concern of making the wrong decision. The fear of failure is pretty universal among grad students. Every PhD candidate fears failing the qualifying exams. Financial concerns, health problems, and family dynamics can also add to the stress.

As I write this, most college students and professors have been vaccinated for COVID-19. The past year brought new challenges with online classes and hardships from the pandemic. I personally fought the illness at the beginning of the pandemic, and I worried about passing COVID-19 to my family members as a few of my friends

and loved ones passed away from COVID-19. Most students shared my fear of becoming deathly ill, and all of our lives were turned upside down during the pandemic. Fear and anxiety peaked both on campus and at home.

A close friend, Zachary Herde, a fifth-year PhD student at Georgia Tech, relates his struggle with anxiety during grad school and how he coped:

Grad school has an unfortunate ability to pull out fears and anxieties that you never thought you could have. My first semester pursuing a PhD was arguably one of the hardest school terms I've had to get through. On top of finding an advisor, which required multiple interviews with each professor I was interested in working with, I was not doing well in class—failing two midterm exams within a week of each other. I didn't feel like I was in the right place or belonged in my program. I

was afraid of being kicked out, of not living up to the goals I had set for myself, and of all the things I would need to address if I had to leave school. These feelings of inadequacy sat with me and caused a tightness in my chest most hours of the day. My mind would ruminate on the situation, frantically thinking about the outcomes; I didn't realize I was doing more harm than good. In fact, my focus on my inadequacy just created deeper rabbit holes for my mind to jump down.

In the midst of it, though, I was fortunate enough to be involved in a local church that not only was encouraging to me but reminded me that my value and worth are not in my abilities. My value is found in Jesus. They also reminded me that God's plan was ultimately good and that my difficult struggles were necessary to reach the goal God had given me. Trusting in that promise gave hope and direction, guaranteeing that whatever would happen, my life in Jesus would lead me where I needed to go.

This has been a recurring theme through my more recent years in grad school as well. It has helped me through my project proposal, a debilitating summer and fall semester struggling with obsessive rumination, the entirety of the COVID-19 pandemic, and now the fear that I won't actually finish my program. I still experience fears and anxiety almost every day, but knowing that Jesus is in control and that He cares for me brings my whole experience into perspective. Feeling that my struggles are for a purpose makes it easier to push through when I'm

scared. But it also takes off the pressure I put on myself to be better. It's OK to give myself some grace when I'm afraid just as Jesus gives us grace for our sins. It's all about taking life on one day at a time.

A verse that codifies this sentiment can be found in Lamentations (3:19-24) and has become a constant in my fear-filled life.

¹⁹ Remember my affliction and my wanderings,
the wormwood and the gall [bitter things]!

²⁰ My soul continually remembers it
and is bowed down within me.

²¹ But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:

²² The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;

²³ they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

²⁴ "The LORD is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."

Though I may suffer through fear and anxiety, my trust in Jesus reminds me that He is in control and that there are still good, beautiful things in the world for us to experience, regardless of the suffering that we muddle through.

Zachary's story illustrates that there's something very special about trusting Jesus. He has a plan for us. He

didn't just bring us to grad school to abandon us and let us fail on our own. Graduate students aren't accustomed to failing, but even when we fail (yes, grad school will be full of failures, as I can personally attest), God will walk with us through those failures and will use them for our greater good. *"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose"* (Rom. 8:28).

That's refreshing news as we navigate through the highs and lows of grad school!

In this next section, we'll explore four key passages in the Bible that point out why Jesus is so significant and what makes Him trustworthy. There's plenty of space in the margins around the passage to make notes. Highlight, circle, or underline the repetitive phrases or ideas that stand out, and then answer the questions after each

passage to later share with others during a Bible study discussion. These passages will not only encourage you in the midst of your fears and anxieties but also equip you to help others find hope and encouragement as they struggle with their own fears.

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. What are your greatest fears? I've heard pastor Tim Keller say in one of his sermons that what we fear losing the most is what we value the most. Do you think that's true? Why or why not?
2. How can you relate to Zachary's story? In what ways is his story encouraging?
3. What are some areas in which you need to trust God? Write these down and spend a few minutes in prayer asking God to help you trust Him more.

Study Passages

MATTHEW 6:19–34

¹⁹“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²²“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

²⁴“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by

being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious,

saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

³⁴“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

What are some key observations?

In this passage:

What needs or issues does this passage address?

Is there anything unusual, confusing, or surprising?

In the world around me:

In what ways have I seen these needs be experienced by others in grad school?

What's the main plot, argument, or idea?

In this passage:

How does God overcome barriers and meet the needs of those in this passage?

How do I personally experience the needs addressed in this passage?

In Christ:

What makes Jesus the best One to run to for the needs surfaced in this passage?

What next step of faith is the Spirit leading me to take to trust Jesus for the needs addressed in this passage?

What question could I ask or what story could I share to start a conversation with another person about the needs surfaced in this passage and the hope Christ offers?

PSALM 34:1–22

(For context, read 1 Sam. 21:10–15.)

¹I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

²My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.

³Oh, magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together!

⁴I sought the LORD, and he answered me
and delivered me from all my fears.

⁵Those who look to him are radiant,
and their faces shall never be ashamed.

⁶This poor man cried, and the LORD heard
him
and saved him out of all his troubles.

⁷The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.

⁸Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

⁹Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints,
for those who fear him have no lack!

¹⁰The young lions suffer want and hunger;
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

¹¹Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

¹²What man is there who desires life
and loves many days, that he may see good?

¹³ Keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from speaking deceit.

¹⁴ Turn away from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.

¹⁵ The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous
and his ears toward their cry.

¹⁶ The face of the LORD is against those who do
evil,
to cut off the memory of them from the earth.

¹⁷ When the righteous cry for help, the LORD
hears
and delivers them out of all their troubles.

¹⁸ The LORD is near to the brokenhearted
and saves the crushed in spirit.

¹⁹ Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD delivers him out of them all.

²⁰ He keeps all his bones;
not one of them is broken.

²¹ Affliction will slay the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be
condemned.

²² The LORD redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be
condemned.

What are some key observations?

In this passage:

What needs or issues does this passage address?

Is there anything unusual, confusing, or surprising?

In the world around me:

In what ways have I seen these needs be experienced by others in grad school?

What's the main plot, argument, or idea?

In this passage:
How does God overcome barriers and meet the needs of those in this passage?

How do I personally experience the needs addressed in this passage?

In Christ:
What makes Jesus the best One to run to for the needs surfaced in this passage?

What next step of faith is the Spirit leading me to take to trust Jesus for the needs addressed in this passage?

What question could I ask or what story could I share to start a conversation with another person about the needs surfaced in this passage and the hope Christ offers?

PHILIPPIANS 4:4–9

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me— practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

What are some key observations?

In this passage:

What needs or issues does this passage address?

Is there anything unusual, confusing, or surprising?

In the world around me:

In what ways have I seen these needs be experienced by others in grad school?

What's the main plot, argument, or idea?

In this passage:
What beliefs or practices is the writer commending?

How do I personally experience the needs addressed in this passage?

In Christ:
What redemptive work of Christ is exalted in this passage?

What next step of faith is the Spirit leading me to take to trust Jesus for the needs addressed in this passage?

What question could I ask or what story could I share to start a conversation with another person about the needs surfaced in this passage and the hope Christ offers?

JOSHUA 1:1–9

¹ After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, ² "Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. ³ Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses. ⁴ From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory. ⁵ No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. ⁶ Be strong and courageous, for you shall

cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. ⁷ Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. ⁸ This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. ⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

What are some key observations?

In this passage:

What needs or issues does this passage address?

Is there anything unusual, confusing, or surprising?

In the world around me:

In what ways have I seen these needs be experienced by others in grad school?

What's the main plot, argument, or idea?

In this passage:
How does God overcome barriers and meet the needs of those in this passage?

How do I personally experience the needs addressed in this passage?

In Christ:
What makes Jesus the best One to run to for the needs surfaced in this passage?

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