

Faith on the edge: Writer Dennis Covington

"Belief is not the 'substance of things hoped for.' Faith is."

interview by [Elizabeth Palmer](#) in the [July 20, 2016](#) issue



Photo by Rebecca Gayle Howell

Dennis Covington's 1995 book Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia was a National Book Award finalist. He went to El Salvador as a freelance writer in the 1980s and has taught writing at Texas Tech and the University of Alabama at Birmingham. His latest book, Revelation: A Search for Faith in a Violent Religious World, recounts his travels in Turkey, Syria, and Juarez, Mexico. During one of his last trips to Syria he suffered a nearly fatal brain injury from an explosion near the Great Mosque of Aleppo.

What was your life like before you started writing about snake-handling Christians?

Because of experiences I had in El Salvador during that country's civil war, especially meeting children who had undergone terrible trauma, my wife and I stopped drinking. Our lives had been really messy, and we were miserable people before, but as a result of my awakening in Central America we started going to

church again. And then our first child came along. It was a gift. We were firmly engaged with our church, which was a large urban progressive Southern Baptist church. We did service at the church and took care of the nursery. I drove the church bus for people at the halfway houses; we were members of the AIDS care team. We prayed at night and took turns reading the Bible to each other. So even before the snake handling our household was occupied by the Holy Spirit.

What does *salvation* mean in the book's title? Did you experience salvation in the events of the book or the writing of it?

For me, the term refers to salvation from self. I've got a strong ego, like a lot of people. And it's destructive. In that sense, salvation is looking outward instead of inward. This is hard to explain, but I was taken out in the spirit as I was writing *Salvation on Sand Mountain*. I can't pick up that book and look at a page without thinking: *I could not have written that myself. It's something different. It's something God-given.* But I've had a crisis of faith lately. I was particularly troubled in my faith by the end of *Revelation*, and I certainly admit that in the book.

What led you to go to Syria as part of your own search for faith?

My intention was to start in Antioch and then do what a lot of people have done, retrace Paul's steps on his mission trips. I planned to look for faith along borders where cultures collided. The border that interested me the most was between Turkey and Syria. During my first trip, I realized I could go right up to that border with no problem. I knew that the next time I came to the region I would cross the border, and the next time after that I would go to Aleppo.

What kind of faith were you searching for? And did you find it?

In the book I limit my search for faith to the definition in Hebrews 11:1, "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (KJV). That verse has always mystified me. It suggests that faith is something tangible, a substance that can be touched. But in contemporary American culture, we often treat faith as though it were just another word for belief, as in: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." When I was a kid I loved to recite that "affirmation of faith" because it gave me comfort. But belief is not what this book is about. Belief is not the "substance of things hoped for." Faith is. And I did find the substance called faith in the shipping container that was turned into a health clinic; the supplies that were so desperately needed; the artwork that the refugee children

created.

You write about finding the evidence of things unseen in the bloodstained steps of a ladder that rebels used to remove their dead from an Aleppo mosque while it was under attack by government troops. How is that evidence?

The bloodstained ladder looked like part of a crime scene. It was evidence of the ferocious battle that had taken place there, and it reminded me of the violent history within and between the three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But the bloodstained ladder was not the substance of things hoped for—because what rational human being could ever have hoped for what happened to the Jewish people during World War II, or to Muslims during the Crusades, or to followers of Christ after his crucifixion, or to all of us in the age of al-Qaeda and ISIS?

Are there differences between the faith of people who are victims of violence, like the Syrians, and the faith of people who willingly put themselves into danger, like the snake handlers?

Well, the civil war in Syria originated when ordinary people stepped forward in the name of political freedom and put themselves at risk of torture and murder. But *Salvation on Sand Mountain* is about spiritual warfare. The snake handlers put themselves at risk of injury and death in order to “confirm the Word.” In Mark 16, the resurrected Jesus says that believers “shall take up serpents,” and the handlers have concluded that they’re the ones to do it. Otherwise, they say, that verse in the Bible would be a lie.

I can still hear the snake handlers saying: “Y’all don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine. If I die, it’s the Lord’s will.” I, on the other hand, was very clear with the handlers. I took up snakes, but I also said to them, “If I ever get bit, call a helicopter and have me flown immediately to the nearest major medical center!”

How do you interpret what’s currently happening in Syria?

My last trip was in June of 2014, and I won’t go back. But I’ve activated Google alert for Syria, so every day I see all the articles and I read them compulsively. The death toll now is probably 470,000. (The toll that we generally see is 250,000, but that’s a UN figure that’s almost three years old.) The deaths, despite all the attempts at peace, have only increased.

There are so many rebel groups. And people over here don't understand. We say: *We'll go after ISIS and we'll go after al-Nusra—because these are terrorist organizations. The only ones that we're not going to go after are the moderates.* But it's not so simple when you're on the ground. It doesn't matter what you believe; what matters is who is protecting you. If al-Nusra is protecting you and your family, you might be sympathetic with them or support them in some way. That doesn't mean you're a terrorist and should be bombed and killed. ISIS may be a different matter. Still, if we were to try to take Raqqa by force, many innocent civilians would likely be killed. They're as terrorized as anyone. It's unbelievably complex.

Do you have hope for Syria?

There's hope but no chance for true peace until Assad steps down. It's hard for me to listen when people say: *In places like Syria, they're not like us. They want a strong person in power to rule them.* I don't buy that. Everybody wants to be free enough to determine their own destiny. Syria used to be a more or less secular state. My Syrian friends have described how their mothers used to go to Easter services even though they were Muslims.

Christianity and Islam aren't so far apart. And Judaism too—we're all of Abrahamic faiths. Almost all the people I saw over there who were doing the work of Jesus were Muslims. They were healing the sick, caring for the widows and orphans. Most of the foreign aid workers were Europeans who didn't have any religious affiliation at all, but they were doing the work of Jesus. And there were Christians among them, of course. We're all in this together.

In *Salvation* you write about how the Holy Spirit shows up in unexpected places. When you visited the Syrian refugee camps in *Revelation*, did you experience God's presence?

God, or Allah or whatever name you give him, seeks us out in our suffering. So it's not surprising that God would be in the refugee camps and walking right beside the people as they're trying to cross borders and in all their suffering.

But I don't want that to be a cop-out: *Well, they've got God so we don't need to care about them.* People often talk about the lost generation of Syrian children. And I want to respond: *They're not lost, they're there! They just need help.* Those children I met in Syria are really resourceful, and they're not defeated by the war. But they are suffering. They just want us to see them. They're not ashamed of anything.

They're like the children who came to Jesus when he said "suffer the little children."

You want peace for those who are suffering, but in your own life you've continually sought out dangerous situations. What's behind your attraction to danger?

Some people would say that I've got an adrenaline addiction, and that may be the case. I don't know exactly what drives it, but it's physiological as well as psychological.

Might your attempts to find faith in dangerous places also be an imitation of Christ?

Sure, in the sense that Christ put himself into danger and went to Jerusalem. There's an ancient monastery on a hill outside Damascus that an Italian Catholic priest named Father Paolo restored as a retreat center for people of all three major religions. He worked there for 30 years. But then the crackdown by Assad sent him back to Italy. Time passed, and ISIS came into being in Syria and kidnapped a bunch of people. So Father Paolo decided he needed to go back to Syria. He told an interviewer: *You have to go to Jerusalem. You have to go in your body; you have to go physically to Jerusalem, as Christ did.* So Father Paolo went back into northern Syria and tried to track down those who were holding the people captive. ISIS captured him—and they most likely killed him. The people who live at the monastery still pray for him and expect him to come back. But he hasn't been seen in nearly three years.

In both *Salvation* and *Revelation* you recount a dream you had about your father several years after he died. Why is that dream important?

In the dream my father came back from the grave to give our family a message. He said: "Jesus found our lives here too beautiful, and so he invented trials from which only he could save us by his act of continual self-sacrifice. Be that as it may, the love of God surpasses all others." It's so mysterious to me. I'd never experienced anything like that before. In some sense it reminds me of the saying "all we have is God." I heard people say that all the time in Syria, and I never quite knew what it meant.

In *Salvation* you write about a sermon that uses the metaphor of putting one's house in order. As you grow older, are there ways you're putting

your house in order?

I live now in a little rental house that's on a huge cotton farm. And there's nothing in that house. I mean, there's my desk and a chair in the living room, and the desk is stacked with books and things. There are a couple of folding camp chairs. And then in my bedroom there's a cot and a small surface that I put a lamp on. That's it. There's nothing on the walls, nothing like that. So literally my house is in order. But I think that's the internal mechanism for trying to get the bigger house, my spiritual life, in order.