

# On a long and tortured road

Matt Rowland Hill lost his faith and gained an addiction to Class A drugs. He talks to **Sarah Meyrick** about what happened next

IN THE opening of his book *Original Sins*, Matt Rowland Hill is in a bathroom, frantically shooting up Class A drugs to help him get through the day.

His equipment is set out on the lavatory lid. "I know by the end of the day I'll be rifling through pockets of blood-soiled litter for a needle that isn't bent and clogged beyond use," he writes. "But for now, looking at my tools in the rhomboid light cast by the window above the sink, I feel inspired, like a gifted painter standing before a blank canvas."

The bathroom is, at least, tolerably clean. "If I absolutely had to find fault with this bathroom — if I could change one thing — it would be the fact that it's in a church filled with mourners at the funeral of a friend of mine who died last week from an overdose of the same drugs I'm about to mainline into my bloodstream."

He injects, staggers through the service, gets into a pointless fight with his friends at the wake — and ends the day scrabbling in the puddle of his own diarrhoea for a left-over wrap of heroin on the floor.

It's a gut-punching prologue to what the publishers describe as "a story of faith, family loss, shame and addiction". Beautifully written, it is also darkly funny.

The bones of the story are this. Hill is the oldest child of a Baptist minister. His parents espouse a fundamentalist faith in which every verse of the Bible is taken literally — and their marriage is toxic.

There is a vivid description of an interminable car journey that begins with prayer ("We pray you will hold us safe in your loving arms as we

make our way to Guernsey today. Help me to drive safely, Lord. We pray that traffic conditions will be favourable, particularly at Junction 33 on the way into Cardiff, which can get very congested, especially during the school holidays"), before lurching into a vicious argument.

"It is better to dwell in the wilderness than with a contentious and angry woman," Dad says. "For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" flings back Mum. "Woman," Dad says, "if you died tonight, I'd *dance on your grave*."

Hill's adolescence is turbulent. He and his brother win scholarships to "a famous public school", where he is a fish out of water. He berates the school chaplain for his shockingly liberal approach to scripture, while at the same time wrestling with doubts, drinking, and smuggling his girlfriend into his dormitory for sex.

HE TURNS his back on religion. He goes to Oxford, where he is "pathologically unhappy". One night, he asks a homeless man for some heroin, and is immediately, violently ill. "And yet, inwardly, I noticed a strange phenomenon," he writes.

"I understood that an alarm bell had been screaming inside me every second of every day for some unknown period, years certainly. Its ringing had been long and persistent enough that, like

tinnitus, it had become intrinsic to my consciousness. Now, I was engulfed by a gorgeous, amniotic silence. And it was only this silence that alerted me to the alarm's former sound and how desperate I'd been to silence it."

The addiction years are ugly, littered with sabotaged relationships, thefts from friends, flight from dodgy dealers. On more than occasion, he should have died; eventually, he finds his way to rehab and recovery.

The memoir — which is searing, angry, and comic by turns — is a way of making sense of his journey. "I started writing in 2017, when I was 33," he says. "When I was 31, I had been lucky enough to go to a wonderful rehab which helped me turn my life around. So I was a

question, Matthew. A very good question. Some of the finest theological minds in history have wrestled with it."

"So what's the answer?"

"Scripture tells us that God determined our eternal destiny before time began. Take John 15: *Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you*. Meanwhile in James 5 we are commanded to *pray one for another, that ye may be healed*." My father brought his potato to his mouth and chewed. "Such teachings may seem irreconcilable to us. But trying to plumb God's wisdom with human reason is like looking at a tapestry from the back. We see no pattern, no meaning. But one day, when we're with the Lord, we'll see his plan in all its beauty. Will you pass the apple sauce, Jonathan?"

My father looked satisfied with this



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and didn't really properly understand till later."

HILL's account of his behaviour is unsparing. He is also unflinching in the description of his parents. ("My mother only really loved two things: Jesus, and special offers. In a way, Jesus was the ultimate special offer, because all you had to do was believe in him to go to heaven for all eternity." His father thunders judgement from the pulpit while keeping a secret supply of cigarettes in his garage.) What have they made of the book?

"My parents have read it. And I'm really grateful to them that they allowed me to tell the story from my own point of view, and to try and tell the story truthfully," he says carefully. He hopes that he has been kind, and open about his failings. "I thought that was the most important thing, to be honest about my own flaws, my own mistakes. . . I have many, and they're all there."

His parents are "not bad people", he insists. "They wanted to do their best, like all parents do. I love my parents very much. It's just a family's a very complicated thing, isn't it?"

He thinks that they are proud of his being published. "But it's always going to be difficult for any family to see its dirty linen aired in public." The three of them are "working on" their relationship.

"I didn't think when I was writing this book that I was writing the Gospel of St Matthew. It's very clearly a subjective account of my experience of being in that family. I have no doubt whatsoever that if my parents or siblings wrote their account, it would look completely different," he says.

There is no question that his loss of faith as a teenager was devastating. He writes: "Could it really be true that everything I'd ever believed — and the whole moral world-view that went with it — was a lie? If I couldn't trust a word my parents said, what could I be sure of?"

Of the defining moment, he says: "I actually stood in front of a mirror one day, and I said out loud the words 'I'm not Christian.' And when I said that, I almost flinched, thinking that God might strike me down with a thunderbolt."

His rejection of religion was total. "That style of religion, it gives you two options: complete surrender and obedience, adherence, or complete rejection. And I chose complete re-

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couple of years clean from drugs, but I was still living as part of that institution, because they had this wonderful kind of community, a space where you carry on living, while you put your life back together."

Reflection on his life led to writing about it. "It just seemed like such a strange series of events. I wanted to figure out what that story meant, and who I was. I thought maybe I was writing a novel at first, but I wasn't too sure."

He did not have a laptop at the time, because he had sold it to buy heroin. "So I started with a piece of paper and a Bic biro." Thanks to a friend who knew something about publishing, by 2019 the completed manuscript was subject to an eight-

way auction and published this summer to critical acclaim.

The book's opening scene is "farfetched and desperate", he says, but it also represents a moment of homecoming. "Here I was, back in a church, face to face with addiction and its darkest consequences, because it really could have been me in that coffin. And on that day I had this emotional experience where so much from my past came up. It happened that the funeral was in Wales, which is where I come from originally; so I heard the Welsh language for the first time in a long time."

"And it . . . caused some sort of emotional reckoning inside me, which I half understood at the time

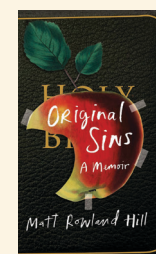
argument and went back to concentrating on his food. I didn't say another word, but inwardly I seethed. A few years ago such flimsy reasoning would have seemed to me the epitome of wisdom. But now I felt the scales falling from my eyes. I hadn't yet altogether lost my faith in God. But my faith in my father was shattered.

Back at school, keeping my doubts behind a locked door in my mind was increasingly consuming all my strength. As my final year wore on, I was more and more exhausted. Could it really be true that everything I'd ever believed — and the whole moral worldview that went with it — was a lie? If I couldn't trust a word my parents said, what could I be sure of?

The terms of Pascal's Wager no longer looked so appealing to me. Sure, if all your

heavenly bananas lined up, you'd hit the eternal jackpot. But, if they didn't, and you spent all your days crossing your fingers, hoping to cash out at the exit by handing over the crumpled ticket of belief — well, in the loss column would go *everything*, including your single chance to create a life based on freedom, courage, dignity, intellectual honesty. After all, what would it profit you if, in attempting to win your soul, you lost the whole world?

This is an extract from *Original Sins* by Matt Rowland Hill, published by Chatto & Windus at £16.99 (Church Times Bookshop £15.29); 978-1-78474-382-6.



I WENT to church the next morning with a mouth that felt like sandpaper and a skull that felt like something was trying to punch its way out. As I sat in the pew listening to my father preaching on the doctrine of predestination, I wondered why, if my parents possessed all the answers to life, they were so unhappy. Why was it that joy seemed to belong to non-Christians like George and Jack and Emma?

After the service I was in a combative mood. Over lunch with my family I raised my voice above the clatter of cutlery. "Dad, tell me something. If God's already decided who's going to heaven and who's going to hell, what's the point in praying for unbelievers to be saved?"

My father waved a forked potato like a conductor's baton "That's a very good