

Chapter One

Arise from Darkness

The young woman who sat a few feet from me quietly wept tears that indicated an unspeakable inner desolation. A week before, her husband had been killed in what is called a “freak accident,” leaving her with two small children and an empty life. On his way to work on Wall Street, he had been struck by a piece of falling masonry that inexplicably had become dislodged from a well-kept building. The insurance companies sometimes refer to such things as “acts of God.”

The couple had had a good marriage despite all the challenges of starting a new family. They were, in fact, “two in one flesh.” Half of her life had been torn away from her in an instant. Her two little children—a boy of three and a girl of five—looked on, not really comprehending that they would never see their daddy again. Friends, and there were many, tried to say something consoling but really did not know what to say. The husband’s parents and family were overwhelmed in their own grief, and her family looked on hopelessly, trying to make some sense out of what was senseless. The priest who preached at the funeral had really done his best; he had been quoted in the local newspapers. He had directed everyone’s attention to Christ’s promise of eternal life. His fellow clergy

of all denominations who read about the funeral were thankful to God that they did not have to preach.

After the funeral the vast majority of mourners, who were genuinely compassionate and “felt very bad about what happened,” went on with their own lives. Very close members of the family committed themselves to various kinds of help, but even their lives went on. The young widow remained in her darkness. Every place in her home became haunted by memories. Objects filled with meaning and joy became crowns of thorns—the wedding picture, his favorite coffee mug, his yearbook. Breakfast, which they used to share so early before he walked to the train, became an almost unendurable reliving of that last breakfast and then the call later from the police. She did not even want to go to her parish church because it brought back scenes of the funeral; she did not want to meet the priest who had come over to the house when he got the news and who had preached the funeral sermon that she could not even remember because she had not really heard it.

You who read these lines are moved even as you read them because you know that they could have been written about you with a few details changed. These lines are written about you . . . and they are written about me. They are written about us all.

Why Did God Do It?

The clergy and lay ministers of every denomination hear this question so often and cannot really answer it. We run away from it because usually it is not a question but a cry of pain in the form of a prayer that is half bewilderment and

often tinged with rage. As we will see, this outraged cry to the mysterious God is often the most sincere and attentive prayer that many people ever offer.

I recall driving past a suburban home and stopping because there were police cars, an ambulance, and neighbors standing around looking at the house. I inquired of a lady wearing an apron what had happened, and she said between sobs, “Crib death—the first child.” The name on the mailbox was Italian, and I asked if a priest had come yet. She said no, so I parked and went in. In the midst of great confusion, a young woman was being consoled by relatives and older women who were embracing and kissing her. When she saw me in my friar’s robes, she jumped up and grabbed me around the neck so hard that she ripped my robe down the front as she cried out, “Why?” This was not a question. It had no answer that I could ever possibly give. I knew even then that the horror of this hour would pass, that she would calm down, that she might very well have other children. But the question would remain for the rest of her life, “Why?”

I will not try to answer that question. I don’t think that the human mind is or ever will be large enough to give a satisfactory answer to these questions: Why does evil occur? Why did the God who made the world so beautiful permit it to be scarred with such terrible wounds? Why does God, who is light, permit such darkness?

Beginning a Half Century Ago

The writing of this book began more than a half century ago when the first great tragedy came into the life of a little boy.

Since his father built defense plants during World War II, he attended more than a dozen grammar schools in as many places. This boy, named Peter, had two faithful companions who went with the family wherever they were transferred. Often this meant transferring twice in a single school year, leaving behind the beginnings of friendships that could not develop in so short a time. These two faithful friends were Scottish terriers, a mother and daughter, and they died within a few months of each other, leaving the little boy bereft and in deep mourning. Don't smile. Often for people who are left alone by circumstances or personality traits, a pet becomes an important companion in life. For a child, the death of a pet can be a deep wound similar to the loss of a human being. I remember praying for these Scotties and asking in my loneliness: Why, why did God take them away from me?

Since then, like all little children who grow up, I have lived through worse tragedies, and all that time this book has been growing inside of me, because a real book is a living thing, a tree that will bear fruit in due time. As I have said, I don't think that one can find in this world a completely satisfying answer to the question "Why?" There will be an answer in eternity when our minds will be large enough to deal with the mystery of evil because "we shall be changed" (1 Cor 15:51).

A Guide—Not an Answer

This book is not an answer but a guide to those in darkness. It is about going on in spite of darkness, about survival, and about using the unavoidable dark times of life to grow. There

is actually nothing new in what I suggest. The solution, not the answer, that I will try to enunciate is found in the gospel and in the lives of great saints, heroes and heroines, and in the lives of very brave ordinary people whom we all have known. Many guides have been written for people struggling with the mystery of evil. It is the theme of much of the great literature of the human race. But in each generation the question returns; each age has its own dark background in front of which the struggle to keep going and find meaning must be worked out. In every age, men, women, and children not only ask “Why?” but ask “How am I going to go on to arise from darkness?” It is that which my book will address.

As we shall see, the Christian response to the problem of evil and suffering began with the Cross of Christ. A Christian cannot find an answer apart from the Cross—apart from Jesus’ own encounter with evil and his triumph over it, his rising from darkness. This response is the struggle to hope. But how? But where? But why? In these reflections I have tried to recall some of the most frequently encountered sorrows and griefs: the failure of friends, financial and personal insecurity, the failure of the Church, our own inconsistent behavior and self-destructiveness, the death of loved ones, and the inescapable loss that we all experience when all that we rely on in this world is slipping away from us. The consideration of each of these painful experiences offers opportunities for us to examine them in the light of our faith in Christ. What is more important, we will be able to learn from the experiences of others how they have learned to rise from darkness by the strength of faith and hope.

I will draw lessons from the lives of people I have known or heard about. When necessary to protect the identity of these people, I will alter the details but never the essentials of what has happened to them. This is done to protect those who do not need to have their wounds opened again. Some whom I have contacted have given me permission to use their experiences and even their words undisguised.

Who Should or Should Not Read This Book?

Some readers may be saying to themselves: “This is too heavy for me right now. Things are going fairly well, and I hope they will continue to go well.” If you feel that way, don’t read this book now. Put it aside for a day when you may need it. Others will say: “Things are going well for me now, but I would like to be compassionate to others, to share their grief even though my life is fairly tranquil.” You may wish to share this book with someone now in the incredible darkness that eventually comes upon us all.

However, this book is written expressly for those going through a time of darkness and pain. I have tried to look at the question “Why?” and I have found only partial answers. I am convinced that believers who are unafraid to pay the price will know what to do though they are unable to understand why this is all happening. The *what* is much more likely to be found than the *why* is to be answered. The *what* cannot be said in a sentence or a few paragraphs. It is experienced in the single intuition of the Cross, the vision of Calvary and the Resurrection, but this vision must be drawn out into words and applied to the difficult situations that are likely to cause

darkness and pain. Picture yourself at night in a dark wood; far ahead of you is a light. Everything else is darkness. There is no doubt about what way to go—toward the light. But between you and the light there is unknown terrain—ditches, brambles, perhaps a barbed wire fence. How do you find the way to the light? You are exhausted, frightened, inclined just to sit there in the dark in hopes that the sky will lighten. You can just wait.

But if you are moved to challenge the darkness, to arise, to follow the light, to find the way, to move on with the precious time of life, then this book is written for you.

The First Step: Getting Over the Big Lie

There is an incredible untruth communicated to children as they grow up in our technologically advanced world, namely, that most people have a good chance of living out their lives without times of suffering or pain, times of darkness. This illusion is created by the media, especially by advertising (a world of happy endings), by education, by generalized attitudes that make up the social customs of our people, and even by our religious thinking. Everyone's life is supposed to be filled with sunshine; and when it is not, luck will change, things will work out well, and the sunny carefree times will return. Not to worry—all will be roses.

This untruth is not a deliberate lie—in fact it is the universal denial of reality. It is not a deception to be condemned but an illusion to be dispelled. We must do this if we are ever to arrive at any mature sense of relative peace and security in this world. Every person reading these lines will have had

some real experiences of darkness in life already, and all will have more unless they die soon. Many are in darkness now, and that's why they have picked up this book. If one does not face this very obvious fact—that times of suffering, pain, and difficulty are inevitable—one will run neurotically through life like a frightened animal. One is likely to become disillusioned and deeply depressed or cynical or filled with a brooding anger. Very likely this anger will be aimed at God; he should have made the world a better place.

If we do not run away from trouble or attempt to avoid it completely, then what are we to do? Obviously the first thing is to have a conviction, a mindset, that trouble and pain are inevitable parts of life. They come to all, especially to those who try desperately to protect themselves from suffering. The most bitterly disappointed people are those who thought that this brief, fragile life was going to bring them the joy reserved for the blessed in heaven.

Once you have rejected the illusion that life is really delightful for most people (and you hoped to be included among them), then you are prepared to face dark times. Some decide to do this by a stoic determination, generally maintaining a dignified silence and trying to avoid involving others in their pain. This attitude may lead to a certain maturity, but it can also lead to a quiet hopelessness, a humorless and bleak approach to life. A stoical friend of mine described life as a journey from obscurity to oblivion. This appraisal omits an appreciation of our own eternal vocation, which brings us beyond the sorrows of this world.

This stoical attitude is deeply entrenched in the social customs of northern European people and their cousins

abroad in North America, Australia, and New Zealand. It also seems to be noticeable in Japan and in the upper class of India. For these people, technological progress is supposed to make pain unnecessary and suffering an aberration. Therefore, to admit suffering becomes socially unacceptable.

“A stiff upper lip” in time of life’s pain and disappointments makes our relationships with our neighbors superficially more pleasant. However, it is worth observing that the nations I have mentioned are not only characterized by a denial of their sorrow but are also the places where neurosis and the psychotherapy that it requires, now that psycho-therapy has become a panacea, are most common. I read somewhere recently that psychotherapy moves people from being miserable to being unhappy. Pretense, denial, and repression are all causes of the neuroses that are so characteristic of the so-called “first world.” The only nations in the West appearing to avoid this neurotic stoicism and pretense are the Latin nations. You may remember, if you are old enough, immigrant relatives who were not yet smitten by the denial of the first world. They told you how they really felt when you asked them.

The obvious fact is that everyone suffers and that almost all go through periods of deep suffering and darkness. Some, inexplicably, seem to experience more suffering than others. If you are in darkness, recognize the fact that you have plenty of company. If you have failed to admit the universal human experience of suffering, then this recognition should make you more compassionate and sensitive to people’s hidden pain in the future. By rejecting the unwarranted illusion that

“everyone is doing well but me,” you will become a far more open human being, sensitive to the sufferings of others, and willing to listen and help. What is far more important, you will not look on this Christian way of acting as a chore or burden. Even if things are going well, compassionate concern for others will constantly remind you that life is not always sunshine. In a wounded world marked by the mystery of the original fall of the human race, life cannot always be beautiful, but it can be filled with meaning.

To Arise Means to Go Beyond

It is not enough merely to survive the trials of life; it is necessary to go beyond them. In the moment of unforeseen grief (like the profound and sudden sorrow of the two young women I mentioned above), any thought of growing through pain is usually incomprehensible. The suggestion alone may cause anger and be resisted. But the intense anger, which is a predictable response to threat, will give way to a decision to go on, to live with the sorrow and even to grow from it. This is what the saints mean by the mystery of the Cross, a mystery essentially linked to the Resurrection. Just as Easter is meaningless without Calvary, Calvary is incomprehensible without the victory of the empty tomb.

If you are reading this book in the intense moment of grief, you need to discipline yourself just to hold on, to survive mutely and without understanding why. But if your suffering has subsided a bit and you have lived with it for a time and are trying to take up your responsibilities to others, to put the pieces back together, you need to ponder the mystery of the

Cross. The message of the Death and Resurrection of Christ is this: with faith we can go repeatedly on in this life by using defeat and loss as an opportunity to challenge God's grace to help us survive. In Genesis 32, Jacob wrestled with the angel of God in the darkness. Although wounded and limping, he received the blessing and went on his way. St. Paul's boast amid his sufferings and disappointments expresses so well the mystery of the Cross (2 Cor 11:21–12:10). All we have to be proud of, to claim as our own, is our weakness and failures, but we can boast "in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14). When we are knocked down and defeated by life, abandoned by friends, betrayed by those we thought we could rely on, weary of our own foolishness or even facing death, that is when we can pick up the Cross and wave it at grief, sadness, and death. To boast in the Cross, it seems to me, is an almost fierce gesture when we confront all that would defeat us and say: "Look at the Cross, all of you, and know that I shall not be overcome, because the Lord of Life is with me and in me, and he will go with me even through the valley of the shadow of death."

The following words of the gentle English mystic and anchoress Blessed Julian of Norwich¹ sum this up so well. Speaking of Christ she wrote:

Though we are in such pain, trouble and distress, that it seems to us that we are unable to think of anything except how we are and what we feel, yet as soon as we may, we are to pass lightly over it, and

¹ Julian of Norwich, *Enfolded in Love: Daily Readings with Julian of Norwich*, trans. a Member of the Julian Shrine [from *Exeter Medieval Texts*, chap. 65, 67, 68, ed. Marian Glasscoe] (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980), 39.

count it as nothing. And why? Because God wills that we should understand that if we know him and love him and reverently fear him, we shall have rest and be at peace. And we shall rejoice in all that he does.

I understood truly that our soul may never find rest in things below, but when it looks through all created things to find its Self, it must never remain gazing on its self, but feast on the sight of God its maker who lives within.

He did not say, "You shall not be tempest-tossed, you shall not be work-weary, you shall not be discomforted." But he said, "You shall not be overcome." God wants us to heed these words so that we shall always be strong in trust, both in sorrow and in joy.

—Prayer—

LORD JESUS CHRIST, long ago at Baptism I became your child and disciple. I have often, as best I was able, recommitted myself to following after you, in spite of all my inconsistencies and failures. I am very weak and confused, and when darkness comes into my life I feel discouraged, overcome, rejected by you. I feel myself to be a scavenger along the debris-filled highways of life. I forget that most if not all of my fellow travelers at some time experience the same feelings, the same painful trials.

Be with me in the dark time, and give me, please, some sign, some awareness of your presence. Send me a ray of hope when the road is long and weary and I feel all alone. At least send your Holy Spirit that I may know in some way you are still with me when all is dark. Amen.