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CHAPTER 1

THE TRAGEDY OF MISPLACED FAITH

Faith can destroy you!

As residents of Chicago, my wife and I clearly remember the Tylenol tampering episode that happened here years ago. You might remember that someone bent on random murder put cyanide in a few capsules. The poison did its work very well. One woman who bought her Tylenol from a drugstore near our church died within minutes after taking a single capsule. In all, seven unsuspecting people died.

Two unforgettable lessons emerged from this tragedy. *First, faith does not in itself have any special merit; it does not have the power to change the nature of a drug from harmful to*

helpful. Seven people firmly believed they were taking medicine, not poison. But their faith did not save them. In fact, their faith killed them.

Faith is only as good as the object in which it is placed. Or, to put it differently, *what* we believe is more important than the fervency of our belief. That old cliché, “It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere,” just isn’t true, as the victims of the Tylenol episode proved. Better to believe the truth with trembling hands than to believe error with steady confidence. What you believe really matters.

A second lesson we must learn from the Tylenol episode is scary indeed: *Sometimes a false belief resembles a true one.* To the casual observer, the cyanide looked just like the Tylenol powder. The label had all the earmarks of being authentic, so there seemed to be no need to distrust the contents. The promise was that these pills would relieve pain, yet taking a single one brought death.

Christ taught that many people who have a strong and abiding faith will someday discover that their faith cannot save them. To their everlasting chagrin, they will live to see the door of heaven slammed in their faces. They will spend eternity on the wrong side of the celestial entrance.

Maybe we can best capture the feeling if we use a story from this side of heaven’s gates. Imagine standing in a swamp while a rescue plane flies overhead. You wave your weary arms and moan, but you know that the pilot does not see you. You do not have the strength to walk to civilization, and because your sense of direction is confused, you would not know where to walk if you could. Since the other members of your party died when your plane went down in the swamp three days ago, you are completely alone.

You stare into the night, knowing that you must simply

lie down in the mud to die. You long for someone to be with you, but you must bear your despair alone. Waves of fear dissipate the courageous thoughts you had yesterday. You have a burning fever, and now you hysterically wait for the end.

Translate that feeling into cosmic proportions. You see the inside of heaven, catch a glimpse of some of your friends, but are told by Christ that you are permanently disqualified. There is no second chance, no opportunity to return the next day with the right documents in your hands. You can't re-route your travel plans. You turn away, never to see heaven again. You stare into the darkness ahead of you, conscious that you are entering the realm of moral chaos, loneliness, and darkness.

The words of Dante, long since forgotten, flash into your mind: "All hope abandon, ye who enter here!"

I wish it weren't so. And I know you do too. Yet Christ taught that many who expect the gate of heaven to swing wide open will be shocked to see it swing shut on them. Their exclusion from His presence is final, personal, and eternal. The words of rejection that they hear from Christ will ring in their ears forever.

Let us hear it from the lips of Christ Himself:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." (MATTHEW 7:21-23)

These people never dreamed that they would be banished by Christ. After all, they acknowledged Him to be Lord and served Him. They had a whole bag of spiritual experiences that ordinary people like you and me could envy. I get chills when I visualize their contorted faces.

These religious types did not lack faith; if anything, they had too much of it! They had the confidence that they would enter into heaven. To hear them tell it, you would think they had a reserved seat in the front row of the balcony in the celestial cathedral. And now *this!*

If you did a personal inventory, their profiles would prove that these were not halfhearted souls who mouthed a commitment to God on Sunday and then did their own thing during the week. They were the dependable people who kept the church doors open year after year. They did miracles in the name of Christ. They even cast out demons and performed a litany of wonderful works. They thought of Christ as their Savior, not their judge. These good people were fooled into accepting cyanide in a Tylenol capsule.

Of course, it's easy for us to think we know who the people are that Christ was talking about. The other day I heard a preacher on television talk as though God didn't do anything unless He consulted with him first (that's an exaggeration, but you get my point). He told glowing stories about his work among the poor. He described all of the miracles God seemed to be doing through him. Maybe it was all true; maybe it was all false; or more likely it was a bit of both. Safe to say, God is His judge.

Let's not misread Christ's point: He does not want us to think that only those who make extravagant religious claims will be deceived. His warning is more basic: *If the people who seem the most likely to make it will be shut out of*

heaven, then plenty of other ordinary people will have the same frightful experience.

Many sincere people who are devoted to their faith, many who would never brag about their relationship with God, and many who just quietly believe and have good works to prove it—these, too, just might miss the heavenly kingdom.

I'm glad that Christ didn't leave us confused about why some people will find themselves on the wrong side of heaven's door. To keep us wondering would not have been kind, but would have left us with our doubts to brood over our uncertain future. What we need is light to find the right path.

I once read about a very tired man who checked himself into a motel late at night. He peered out of the darkened window as he closed the shades, then sank into a deep sleep. When he awoke and pulled back the shades, he saw majestic Mount Rainier through the motel window. The mountain had been there all the time; it was there even in the darkness. But he couldn't see it until the light of the sun showed him where he was.

That's the way truth is. We can't make it up. We can't create it by sleight of hand. All we can do is discover it in the presence of God's light as revealed in the Bible. Just as the light of the sun can enable us to see where we are geographically, so the light of another Son (Christ) can help us see where we are spiritually. *And I believe He wants us to know whether we will spend eternity with Him.*

The purpose of this book is to help us understand all that Christ has done to make it possible for us to know where we are going and that we do have a place reserved for us in heaven. I believe that we can be just as confident as the early disciples that our eternal future is secure. Just listen to what Christ promised them:

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. (JOHN 14:1-3)

The New Testament invites anyone, regardless of his or her past, to have the assurance that he or she will be escorted by Christ into the glory of a personal, heavenly existence. It is interesting that Christ taught that only a few would take advantage of this offer. Before I explain why, let's hear Christ's description of the two roads that are going in opposite directions.

A Fork in the Road

Recently I was discussing the credentials of Christ with a woman who said, "I believe that there are many paths to God. People can come in their own way." I told her I wished that were true, but I was confronted with a choice—do I believe her well-intentioned opinion, or do I believe in what Christ Himself had to say? He was not as broad-minded as many of the gurus who occasionally make headlines.

Christ insisted that there was a narrow road that led to eternal life, but, in contrast, there was a broad road that led to spiritual death. Clearly, there are two separate gates, therefore, two roads and two very different destinations. Hear it in His own words:

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

(MATTHEW 7:13-14)

Visualize an expressway with several lanes of traffic. Each lane has its own religion, philosophy, and point of view. Popular culture today tells us that we can choose our own belief, church, or personal philosophy. We can even switch lanes if we like. Everyone makes it to the finish line; everyone has a good time; everybody wins. The fun is in the journey.

Of course, it is quite true that when you are on an expressway, it really doesn't matter which lane you choose. And, yes, you can switch lanes as often as you like. In the end, you will get to the same destination as the folks who are zooming by on your left or the slowpokes you are passing on your right. It's not what lane you are in, but the expressway you are on that determines your destination. Your lane is your choice. Your final address is not.

Now it gets tricky. According to Christ, this wide expressway, which is thought by many to be labeled "The Way to Heaven" is actually "The Way to Destruction." Even in the Old Testament we read, "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death" (Proverbs 14:12). The cyanide is labeled "Tylenol."

In contrast, Christ says that the way to life is narrow and "those who find it are few." Here there is only one lane of traffic. The travelers come in various shapes and sizes, but, as we shall see, they share a common core of beliefs. The lane is too narrow to accommodate a host of different opinions about religion in general and about Christ in particular. But I'm ahead of the story.

There are more people on the broad way than the narrow one. And if we are not careful, we will get the two roads confused. Just ask the people who expected to enter heaven but were told by Christ to leave. He consigned those otherwise

good people to the same destination as those who “practice lawlessness.”

No wonder that John Bunyan, in his classic allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*, wrote, “I saw that there was a way to Hell, even from the gates of heaven.” And so there is.

The Three Lanes

There are many wrong paths to God but only one right one. We don't have to be experts in identifying all of the false paths, for, if we are observant, we will notice that, despite differences, they all have a common characteristic. Try to find it as I describe three lanes of the superhighway that is going in the wrong direction.

The Ladder Climbers

While riding on a plane, I had a conversation with a man who said to me, “My greatest fear is to stand behind Mother Teresa on the day of judgment and overhear the Lord saying to her, ‘Lady, you could have done a whole lot more!’” This man was an achiever who was trying to climb a ladder to God, but he wasn't sure whether he had even made it to the first rung!

Though it has variations, you have probably heard it a dozen times: God has given us a conscience, a moral nature that can distinguish (however imperfectly) between right and wrong. He gives us the ability to do good works that have the power to purify the soul. Our task is to use these gifts to the best of our ability.

Devotions, prayers, and disciplines help lift us rung by rung. And though we might not do all that we should, we can depend on God's grace to get us the rest of the way. As the cliché says, “God helps those who help themselves.”

Chances are your friends believe this. Maybe you do, too. If you are a perfectionist, or if you have had to work for everything you have ever had, this route will be particularly appealing. According to a Barna Research report, almost all Americans believe they are good enough to get to heaven. That doesn't mean they think they are perfect, but that they think they are as good as, or better than, others. Even those who don't go to church see themselves as decent enough to have a good chance of "making it."

I often ask people this question: "If you were to die today and God were to say to you, 'Why should I let you into heaven?' what would you reply?" Nine out of ten say something like this: "I'm a pretty good person, and I'm trying hard to do better."

For now let's just file this answer in the back of our minds. We'll reflect on it later.

The Religious Types

Perhaps you are surprised that I've put religion in the "mistaken" category, that I'm listing it as just another lane on the broad expressway. "After all," you might say, "if religion does not get us to God, what will?"

But think about this for a moment. The people who were banished by Christ were certainly religious. I get the impression that they didn't just serve God occasionally but actually made it a way of life. When they were knocking on heaven's gate, the reason they expected to gain entrance is that they had done so many religious works in the name of Christ.

Religion can take many forms. For some, it involves sacraments, which are believed to be channels of grace for the faithful. The church, the argument goes, has the power to complete our incomplete deeds.

For others, religion is studying the ethics of Jesus and trying to live by those precepts. Knowledge linked with proper motivation helps us live a religious life, we are told.

We've all met those who believe they have met God through nature. The contemplation of the works of God leads to a knowledge of God, they say.

As you well know, there are dozens of different religions in the world, and each has its own creeds, ethics, and expectations. Religion, if understood broadly, is much more diverse than most people realize.

However, religion is really just another version of the "ladder theory." Religion defines the rungs more carefully and states the expectations more clearly. And, of course, God's help is often sought. But religion, as such, is not the way.

Reasons will be given later.

The Mystics

Of course the mystics are religious too, but I've given them their own category because they are unique people who usually seek God with more intensity than others. Throughout the years, some devout souls (bless them) have renounced the world and secluded themselves in monasteries to find God. Maybe there are not many people who do that today, but the idea that we can find God within us through meditation and concentration is gaining adherents.

I've often admired the Christian mystics, those hardy souls who can take their faith that seriously. These men and women took the words of Christ, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37) as their compelling vision. They fasted and they prayed; they meditated on the Scriptures or other devotional literature. They tried to deal with

the sin that cropped up in their own hearts so that they could love God with pure motives.

Certainly some mystics found God, but not in the way or for the reasons that they thought. The temptation was to fall into some form of the ladder theory, to strive within the soul to make oneself worthy of God. Finding salvation through mysticism was such hard work that few mystics knew when they had finally made it. Indeed, most thought one could never know.

Today there are many who are into a different kind of mysticism, a form of spirituality that seeks an inner encounter with whatever God or gods there be. Techniques of meditation and self-help promise that God is just waiting to be discovered. Usually the goal is to lose one's identity and "become one" with the ultimate, or the divine.

These folks believe God is accessible to anyone who seeks Him. Often they also believe that He can be found in any one of the religions of the world. After all, if God is within us all, He is available to everyone, at anytime, anywhere. We just need to find the key, and the door to spirituality will swing wide open.

But, as we shall see, the door is jammed.

Beyond Good Deeds

Certainly these lanes on the expressway look as if they might be right. If salvation (that is, being reconciled to God) does not come by my striving to make myself a better person, what is left? What could appear to be more right than the view that we accept God's grace to do the best we can and expect Him to do the rest? And what could possibly be wrong with trying to find God within ourselves? Yet the travelers who follow these paths encounter bumps along the *way*—*barri- cades* might be a better word.

A friend of mine told me how guilty he felt when, as a youngster, he switched a sign on a street and watched as the motorists were misled. Signposts are important; if they are incorrectly labeled, the consequences can be disastrous.

Each of the three paths above shares a common error. *They overestimate our ability and underestimate God's holiness.* They operate from a skewed perspective of ourselves. We see shades of goodness and badness, and as long as we compare ourselves to others, we can be quite confident that we are worthy of God's love and forgiveness.

We've all had that satisfied feeling that comes from doing our "good deed for the day." When we go the extra mile by taking care of our neighbor's children, giving some money to charity, or making an honest deal, we feel smug about our goodness. And when we pick up the newspaper and read about those who kill and steal, we feel pride at how different (and better) we really are. We might even think about how much better the world would be if everyone was just like us.

Our problem is that we are looking at ourselves through the wrong end of the telescope. We are actually much farther from God than we can imagine. The better we understand God, the more convinced we will be that there is no recognizable common moral ground between us and Him. It turns out that we are like the boy who told his mother that he was eight feet tall, at least according to the yardstick *he* had made!

I can't speak for you, but my problem is that I'm not very good at climbing a ladder to God. No matter how hard I try, my basic nature remains unchanged. I can resolve to be better, and I might even improve, but I am fundamentally the same within. My problem is that after I climb the ladder a foot, I often fall back a yard. I mess up. If we could grasp how holy God is, I am sure we would quickly agree that we have

misjudged how far up the ladder we have come. Fact is, we even hide our true selves from ourselves, for, beneath it all, we are nasty sinners. I agree with Augustine, who said, “He who believes that God is holy will despair trying to appease Him.”

Later in this book I will explain why some people who take steps toward God might actually be taking steps away from Him. As we shall see, the harder we work to attain heaven, the less likely we are to make it. *Our good works give us a false sense of assurance because they mask our real need.*

Church rituals don't help much. The problem is that if I am accumulating grace through the sacraments, good works, and learning, I still don't know when I have enough. Even if I could take care of my past sins, tomorrow is another day.

Even the mystics had to admit that the more carefully they looked into their hearts, the more they realized that they could not love God unselfishly. The closer they got to God, the more clearly they saw their mixed motives. Yes, they loved God, but perhaps they did so out of fear of hell or out of a desire for self-fulfillment. Who can say that he loves God with pure, unselfish motives?

To really love God means we should hate sin. So these sincere souls tried to get themselves to hate what they knew they secretly loved! Try as they might, however, they could not uproot sin from within their hearts. Greed, lust, envy, self-will—those still lurked within the soul. Left unresolved was the question of how a holy God could meet them within their souls, which had not yet been purified. The more they contemplated their own hearts, the more sin they saw.

Whatever else may be said about the path of the mystics, it was simply not accessible to everyone. The common person who had to work long hours to earn a living had neither the time nor the opportunity to devote his life to mystical

contemplation of God. And if those who did have such an opportunity confessed that they died without the assurance of salvation, the question was: Why bother?

When our oldest daughter was about ten years old, she talked us into buying a hamster. I felt sorry for that little animal, running on his wheel at all hours of the day. My response was to put a drop of oil on the wire axle so that I didn't have to hear the squeaking that came from his cage. If you are going to run on a treadmill, at least you should do so without disturbing others!

There is such a thing as a religious treadmill. When we are on that treadmill, there is no relief from the daily recognition that what we do is never enough, and there is no escape from the worry that, after we have expended all this energy, God just might put the bar a notch higher. We sympathize with the man who feared hearing the Lord tell Mother Teresa that she should have done more. Some people have chosen to get off the treadmill altogether. They have left religion behind and seem to be content just doing the best they can, hoping that everything will turn out right. Many of them feel better because of it.

The Way to Reassurance

C. S. Lewis said, "The safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts." Or, as we have learned, it is the attractive, well-traveled road with mislabeled signposts. You're convinced that this crowd of well-meaning people couldn't be wrong.

But if the lanes that look so right are really on the "broad way that leads to destruction," as Christ put it, how can we recognize the narrow way that leads to life? And how can

we be sure that the path we chose is the right one? These questions will be answered more fully later on, but for now let's just think about what the narrow road would have to look like, given our predicament.

Since we will always fail at climbing the ladder to God, we need God Himself to come down the ladder and rescue us. We need God to initiate a plan that is so radical, so drastic, that it is independent of our own tainted efforts. We need a grand scheme that will overcome all of our shortcomings.

We need a way that doesn't appeal simply to those who have a bent toward religion; we need a help that isn't limited to those who were brought up in fine homes and have managed to stay out of trouble. The narrow way has to work for people regardless of their racial origin or their social and financial advantages or disadvantages.

Realistically, this path should be open even to those who have failed "big time." You might know an alcoholic, a rapist, or even a murderer who is too morally weak, or too run-down, and has done too much damage to climb even the most user-friendly ladder to God. Some people, figuratively speaking, have fallen off the ladder completely. In fact, we all have.

Pastoring in downtown Chicago for so many years, I have come to realize that many people (more than we would like to admit) have done terrible things that they cannot change. I have met people who have destroyed other people's lives through abuse, drugs, and crimes. Some have broken marriages, angry children, and ruined careers. Some have well-hidden skeletons that torment them in moments of quietness and solitude.

These folks don't know where to begin in coping with their guilt and failure. They have done too much damage to be saved by good works. Nobody knows how much grace

they would have to accumulate to become holy enough for God to receive them. For them, the paths that we have briefly explored simply will not do.

Finally, if there is a path that really does lead to God, we should know it. To put it differently, we should have the *assurance* that our relationship with God rests on a solid foundation.

What I long for, and what I think every person longs for, is the knowledge that my relationship with God is secure—permanently secure—not just for today, but for tomorrow and for all of eternity. And such knowledge should be available to all who sincerely desire it, no matter how messed up, no matter how great their sin or crimes.

Neither you nor I want to be among those who are banished from heaven because we were on the wrong path. We should welcome, rather than fear, an examination of our convictions. Christ taught that our eternal destiny is dependent on what we believe and on what we do with those beliefs.

So we must approach these questions with an open mind and a willingness to learn and have our convictions challenged. Someday many will have to admit ruefully that misplaced faith is worse than no faith at all.

The question is not whether a path looks good or even feels right. The question is: Is it God's way, or is it what I *think* is God's way?

Stay tuned.