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CHAPTER ONE

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## ARM YOURSELVES

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;  
I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.  
—JESUS OF NAZARETH (JOHN 10:10)

We and the world, my children, will always be at war.  
Retreat is impossible.  
Arm yourselves.

—LEIF ENGER

We were running low on fuel, and still the fog refused to lift. Icy Straight spread out below us, beautiful and threatening. I've always loved the ocean, the wilder the better. But clearly, this was no place to run out of gas. If by chance we survived ditching the small plane, we'd last about seven minutes in those waters. The nearest chance at rescue lived more than forty minutes away. *Great. This is just how it happens*, I thought. *We'll make Reader's Digest. "Family on vacation lost in fatal crash."* Rain and mist smeared the windshield as we strained our eyes ahead, searching for a break in the clouds. There's no radar in these planes; bush pilots fly VFR—visual flight

restrictions. If you can't see where you're going, well, then, mister, you can't go there. And you can't keep trying forever, either; the clock that's running is the fuel gauge. Three more minutes, and we'll have to turn back.

"We'll give it one more pass."

"Fairweather Mountain" is a total misnomer. With a name like that, don't you picture some lovely place in Hawaii or maybe Costa Rica—balmy breezes, gentle green slopes, the weather always, well, *fair*? These mountains explode 15,000 feet or more above sea level, right off the coast of southeastern Alaska, sheer cliffs and foreboding glaciers. Some of the world's worst weather hangs out here.

The pilot was yelling above the drone of the engine, "They get their name 'cause you can only see 'em in fair weather."

*How cute. What idiot came up with that cleverness?* Raw fear had swallowed my sense of humor whole. *They ought to have named them the Peaks of Frozen Death or the Don't Even Think About It Mountains.* Fair weather? Around here, that means maybe twenty days a year—if you're lucky.

We got lucky.

And I have never seen anything more breathtaking in all my life. We banked along vertical granite walls that rose and fell thousands of feet on either side, like a sparrow gliding among the Himalayas. "Are those waterfalls?" I asked, pointing to several cascades of white falling through thin air over the black cliffs.

"Avalanches. It must be warm up here today."

Massive crevasses in the glaciers below held pools of clear water—a color I never knew existed, something between azure and cerulean blue.

"Those cracks are so big we could fly right down 'em."

I pretended not to hear. I felt we'd slipped through Death's grasp, and I didn't want to give him another swipe. The beauty that now engulfed us was enough.

## IN DESPERATE NEED OF CLARITY

Twenty clear days a year—that sounds about like my life. I think I see what’s really going on about that often. The rest of the time, it feels like fog, like the bathroom mirror after a hot shower. You know what I mean. What exactly are you perfectly clear on these days? How about your life? Why have things gone the way they have? Where was God in all that? And do you know what you ought to do next, with a deep, settled confidence that it will work out? Neither do I. Oh, I’d *love* to wake each morning knowing exactly who I am and where God is taking me. Zeroed in on all my relationships, undaunted in my calling. It’s awesome when I do see. But for most of us, life seems more like driving along with a dirty windshield and then turning into the sun. I can sort of make out the shapes ahead, and I think the light is green.

Wouldn’t a little bit of clarity go a long way right now?

Let’s start with why life is so dang *hard*. You try to lose a little weight, but it never seems to happen. You think of making a shift in your career, maybe even serving God, but you never actually get to it. Perhaps a few of you do make the jump, but it rarely pans out the way you thought. You try to recover something in your marriage, and your spouse looks at you with a glance that says, “Nice try,” or “Isn’t it a little late for that?” and the thing actually blows up into an argument in front of the kids. Yes, we have our faith. But even there—maybe *especially* there—it all seems to fall rather short of the promise. There’s talk of freedom and abundant life, of peace like a river and joy unspeakable, but we see precious little of it, to be honest.

Why is it that, as Tillich said, it’s only “here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves” we see any evidence of a new creation? Here and there, now and then. In other words . . . not much. When you stand them side by side, the *description* of the Christian life practically shouted in the New Testament compared

with the *actual* life of most Christians, it's . . . embarrassing. Paul sounds like a madman, and we look a little foolish, like children who've been held back a grade. Why is it that nearly every good thing, from taking the annual family vacation to planning a wedding to cultivating a relationship, takes so much work?

It's almost as if there is something set against us.

## SHELL SHOCK

Some dear friends of mine just returned from a three-week vacation in France. It had been their dream for nearly twenty-five years. What could be more romantic than strolling the Champs Élysées in the evening, as lovers do? It seemed an ideal way to celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. They'd both served God faithfully for decades, but over the years a European rendezvous seemed about as reachable as the moon. Then, late last fall, things suddenly came together.

Friends of theirs were headed to Europe and offered two tickets to come along. Time off was available. They were going to France. And right after they made it to Paris, it all fell apart. Craig came down with walking pneumonia; Lori wanted to leave the third day. All sorts of issues in their marriage surfaced, but since they were with friends, the issues mostly played themselves out in their own thoughts—which tended toward divorce. It wasn't romantic; it was *hard*. Afterward, as we talked on the phone about the whole thing, Lori said, "Life never seems to turn out the way you think it will, about 90 percent of the time." No kidding. Haven't we all got a story that goes with that little bumper sticker?

Just the day before, I received another call. That was the morning our son Blaine was to have his final cardiologist appointment, and I was anxious to hear the news. Now, I know that every parent thinks his child is head and shoulders above the rest, but I'm telling

you—Blaine is a special one. He turned eleven this year, and he's one of the healthiest, happiest kids I've ever known. His heart is so good, so spiritually aware, so keen to the hearts of others. He's surprisingly compassionate for a boy his age, and he's also the most courageous one of us all. When it comes to rock climbing or cliff jumping or skiing, Blaine is always the first to go for it. He's a great athlete and a talented artist and a riot when it comes to his humor. He plays the violin; he memorizes cowboy poetry; he blows stuff up; he wants to be a Jedi knight. I love this boy.

And it's a long story of prayer and hope and worry over Blaine. When he was young, his pediatrician picked up an anomaly in his heart during a routine checkup. The cardiologist confirmed through a battery of tests that, indeed, Blaine had several holes in his heart. "He'll need surgery," he said. We opted to wait until Blaine was older, to give God a chance to intervene. The thought of putting my son under open-heart surgery gave me the shudders.

Over the course of those years we spent many nights in prayer that God would heal Blaine's heart. During one of those times, Stasi, not usually given to visions, had a picture of a light penetrating his heart. At that moment, she felt certain God had healed him. And just this morning, the day for his annual checkup, as I began to pray for Blaine, I sensed Jesus say, *I've healed him*. My heart rested, and I waited for the good report.

"Hi . . . it's me." A long silence. "Blaine needs surgery . . . right away."

Hope vanished. I felt that sick-in-the-gut feeling of an imminent free fall, that feeling you get on top of a ladder that's starting to sway under you. All kinds of thoughts and emotions rushed in. *What? Oh, no . . . Not after all this . . . I . . . I thought . . .* My heart was sinking. Despair, betrayal, abandonment by God. Failure on our part to pray enough or believe enough. I felt moments away from a total loss of heart. It seemed inevitable.

These moments aren't a rational, calculated progression of thought; they're more like being tossed out of a raft in a storm. It comes fast and furious, but the pull of the current is always toward a loss of heart. Most of the time we are swept away; we give in, lose heart, and climb out of it sometime later. Some never climb out.

## EYES TO SEE

When Spillane (*The Perfect Storm*) treats injured seamen offshore, one of the first things he evaluates is their degree of consciousness. The highest level, known as "alert and oriented times four," describes almost everyone in an everyday situation. They know who they are, where they are, what time it is, and what's just happened. If someone suffers a blow to the head, the first thing they lose is recent events—"alert and oriented times three"—and the last thing they lose is their identity. A person who has lost all levels of consciousness, right down to their identity, is said to be "alert and oriented times zero." When John Spillane wakes up in the water, he is alert and oriented times zero. His understanding of the world is reduced to the fact that he exists, nothing more. Almost simultaneously, he understands that he is in excruciating pain. For a long time, that is all he knows.

John Spillane is a para-rescue jumper sent into the North Atlantic, into the worst storm of the twentieth century, the *perfect storm*, as the book and film called it, to rescue a fisherman lost at sea. When his helicopter goes down, he is forced to jump into pitch blackness from an unknown height, and when he hits the water, he's going so fast it's like hitting the pavement from eighty feet above. He is dazed and confused—just as we are when it comes to the story of our lives. It's the perfect analogy. We have no idea who we really are, why we're here, what's happened to us, or why. Honestly, most days we are alert and oriented times zero.

Has God abandoned us? Did we not pray enough? Is this just something we accept as “part of life,” suck it up, even though it breaks our hearts? After a while, the accumulation of event after event that we do not like and do not understand erodes our confidence that we are part of something grand and good, and reduces us to a survivalist mind-set. I know, I know—we’ve been told that we matter to God. And part of us partly believes it. But life has a way of chipping away at that conviction, undermining our settled belief that he means us well. I mean, if that’s true, then why didn’t he \_\_\_\_\_? Fill in the blank. Heal your mom. Save your marriage. Get you married. Help you out more.

Either (a) we’re blowing it, or (b) God is holding out on us. Or some combination of both, which is where most people land. Think about it. Isn’t this where *you* land, with all the things that haven’t gone the way you’d hoped and wanted? Isn’t it some version of “I’m blowing it”? in that it’s your fault, you could have done better, you could have been braver or wiser or more beautiful or something? Or “God is holding out on me,” in that you know he *could* come through, but he hasn’t come through—and what are you to make of that?

This is The Big Question, by the way, the one every philosophy and religion and denominational take on Christianity has been trying to nail down since the dawn of time. *What is really going on here?* Good grief—life is brutal. Day after day it hammers us, till we lose sight of what God intends toward us, and we haven’t the foggiest idea why the things that are happening to us *are* happening to us. Then you watch lives going down with the Twin Towers, read about children starving in Ethiopia, and wham! If a good God is really in charge . . . all that.

I felt so bad that Paris wasn’t what my friends hoped it would be, but I wasn’t sure what to say. Like most Christians in that situation, I simply asked Lori how I could pray for them. “That we would have eyes to see what’s going on.” My heart leaped. Brilliant! Perfect! That

is *exactly* what we need. Eyes to see. Isn't that what Jesus offered us—clarity? Recovery of sight for the blind (Luke 4:18)? We need clarity and we need it badly. A simple prayer rises from my heart: *Jesus, take away the fog and the clouds and the veil, and help me to see . . . give me eyes to really see.*

## THE OFFER IS *LIFE*

The glory of God is man fully alive. (Saint Irenaeus)

When I first stumbled across this quote, my initial reaction was . . . *You're kidding me. Really?* I mean, is that what you've been told? That the purpose of God—the very thing he's staked his reputation on—is your coming fully alive? Huh. Well, that's a different take on things. It made me wonder, *What are God's intentions toward me? What is it I've come to believe about that?* Yes, we've been told any number of times that God does care, and there are some pretty glowing promises given to us in Scripture along those lines. But on the other hand, we have the days of our lives, and they have a way of casting a rather long shadow over our hearts when it comes to God's intentions toward *us* in particular. I read the quote again, "The glory of God is man fully alive," and something began to stir in me. *Could it be?*

I turned to the New Testament to have another look, read for myself what Jesus said he offers. "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Wow. That's different from saying, "I have come to forgive you. Period." Forgiveness is awesome, but Jesus says here he came to give us *life*. Hmmm. Sounds like ol' Irenaeus might be on to something. "I am the bread of life" (John 6:48). "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:38). The more I looked, the more this whole theme of life jumped off the pages. I mean, it's *everywhere*.



Above all else, guard your heart,  
for it is the wellspring of life. (Prov. 4:23)

You have made known to me the path of life. (Ps. 16:11)

In him was life, and that life was the light of men. (John 1:4)

Come to me to have life. (John 5:40)

Tell the people the full message of this new life. (Acts 5:20)

I began to get the feeling of a man who's been robbed. I'm well aware that it's life I *need*, and it's life I'm looking for. But the offer has gotten "interpreted" by well-meaning people to say, "Oh, well. Yes, of course . . . God intends life for you. But that is *eternal* life, meaning, because of the death of Jesus Christ you can go to heaven when you die." And that's true . . . in a way. But it's like saying getting married means, "Because I've given you this ring, you will be taken care of in your retirement." And in the meantime? Isn't there a whole lot more to the relationship *in the meantime*? (It's in the meantime that we're living out our days, by the way.) Are we just lost at sea? What did Jesus mean when he promised us life? I go back to the source, and what I find is just astounding.

I am still confident of this:

I will see the goodness of the LORD  
in the land of the living. (Ps. 27:13)

"I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life." (Luke 18:29–30)

Jesus doesn't locate his offer to us only in some distant future after we've slogged our way through our days here on earth. He talks about a life available to us *in this age*. So does Paul: "Godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Tim. 4:8). Our *present* life and the next. When we hear the words *eternal life*, most of us tend to interpret that as "a life that waits for us in eternity." But *eternal* means "unending," not "later." The Scriptures use the term to mean we can never lose it. It's a life that can't be taken from us. The offer is life, and that life starts *now*.

Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, *now* we also may live new lives. (Rom. 6:4 NLT, emphasis added)

*The glory of God is man fully alive? Now?* Hope unbidden rose at the thought that God's intentions toward me might be better than I'd thought. His happiness and my happiness are tied together? My coming fully alive is what he's committed to? *That's* the offer of Christianity? Wow! I mean, it would make no small difference if we knew—and I mean *really* knew—that down-deep-in-your-toes kind of knowing that no one and nothing can talk you out of—if we *knew* that our lives and God's glory were bound together. Things would start looking up. It would feel promising, like making friends on the first day of school with the biggest kid in class.

The offer is life. Make no mistake about that. So then . . . where *is* that life? Why is it so rare?

## WE ARE AT WAR

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

Have you ever wondered why Jesus married those two statements? Did you even know he spoke them at the same time? I mean, he says them in one breath. And he has his reasons. By all means, God intends life for you. But right now that life is *opposed*. It doesn't just roll in on a tray. There is a thief. He comes to steal and kill and destroy. In other words, yes, the offer is life, but you're going to have to fight for it because there's an Enemy in your life with a different agenda.

There *is* something set against us.

We are at war.

How I've missed this for so long is a mystery to me. Maybe I've overlooked it; maybe I've chosen not to see. *We are at war*. I don't like that fact any more than you do, but the sooner we come to terms with it, the better hope we have of making it through to the life we do want. This is not Eden. You probably figured that out. This is not Mayberry; this is not *Seinfeld*'s world; this is not *Survivor*. The world in which we live is a combat zone, a violent clash of kingdoms, a bitter struggle unto the death. I'm sorry if I'm the one to break this news to you: you were born into a world at war, and you will live all your days in the midst of a great battle, involving all the forces of heaven and hell and played out here on earth.

Where *did* you think all this opposition was coming from?

Earlier in the Story, back in the beginning of our time on earth, a great glory was bestowed upon us. We all—men and women—were created in the image of God. Fearfully and wonderfully made, fashioned as living icons of the bravest, wisest, most stunning Person who ever lived. Those who have ever seen him fell to their knees without even thinking about it, as you find yourself breathless before the Grand Canyon or the Alps or the sea at dawn. That glory was shared with us; we were, in Chesterton's phrase, "statues of God walking about in a Garden," endowed with a strength and beauty all our own. All that we ever wished we could be, we were—and more. We were fully alive.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)

When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—  
     the moon and the stars you have set in place—  
 what are mortals that you should think of us,  
     mere humans that you should care for us?  
 For you made us only a little lower than God,  
     and you crowned us with glory and honor. (Ps. 8:3–5 NLT)

I daresay we've heard a bit about original sin, but not nearly enough about original glory, which comes *before* sin and is deeper to our nature. We were crowned with glory and honor. Why does a woman long to be beautiful? Why does a man hope to be found brave? Because we remember, if only faintly, that we were once more than we are now. The reason you doubt there could be a glory to your life is because that glory has been the object of a long and brutal war.

For lurking in that Garden was an Enemy. This mighty angel had once been glorious as well, the captain of the Lord's hosts, beautiful and powerful beyond compare. But he rebelled against his Creator, led a great battle against the forces of heaven, and was cast down. Banished from his heavenly home, but not destroyed, he waited for an opportunity to take his revenge. Unable to overthrow the Mighty One, he turned his sights on those who bore his image. He lied to us about where true life was to be found, and we believed him. We fell, and "our glory faded," as Milton said, "faded so soon." Or as David lamented, "You turn my glory into shame" (Ps. 4:2).

But God did not abandon us, not by a long shot. I think even a quick read of the Old Testament would be enough to convince you that *war* is a central theme of God's activity. There is the Exodus, where God goes to war to set his captive people free. Blood. Hail.

Locusts. Darkness. Death. Plague after plague descends on Egypt like a boxer's one-two punch, like the blows of some great ax. Pharaoh releases his grip, but only for a moment. The fleeing slaves are pinned against the Red Sea when Egypt makes a last charge, hurtling down on them in chariots. God drowns those soldiers in the sea, every last one of them. Standing in shock and joy on the opposite shore, the Hebrews proclaim, "The LORD is a warrior!" (Ex. 15:3). Yahweh is a warrior.

Then it's war to get *to* the promised land. Moses and company have to do battle against the Amalekites; again God comes through, and Moses shouts, "The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation" (Ex. 17:16). Yahweh will be at war. Indeed. You ain't seen nothin' yet. Then it's war to get *into* the promised land—Joshua and the battle of Jericho, all that. After the Jews gain the promised land, it's war after war to *keep* it. Israel battles the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Midianites, the Egyptians again, the Babylonians—and on and on it goes. Deborah goes to war; Gideon goes to war; King David goes to war. Elijah wars against the prophets of Baal; Jehoshaphat battles the Edomites. Are you getting the picture?

Many people think the theme of war ends with the Old Testament. Not at all. Jesus says, "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). In fact, his birth involved another battle in heaven:

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads . . . The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour

her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter . . . And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven . . . Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus. (Rev. 12:1–5, 7–8, 17)

The birth of Christ was an act of war, an *invasion*. The Enemy knew it and tried to kill him as a babe (Matt. 2:13). No pale-faced altar boy, the whole life of Christ is marked by battle and confrontation. He kicks out demons with a stern command. He rebukes a fever, and it leaves Peter's mother-in-law. He rebukes a storm, and it subsides. He confronts the Pharisees time and again to set God's people free from legalism. In a loud voice he wakes Lazarus from the dead. He descends to hell, wrestles the keys of hell and death from Satan, and leads a train of captives free (Eph. 4:8–9; Rev. 1:18). And when he returns, I might point out, Jesus will come mounted on a steed of war, with his robe dipped in blood, armed for battle (Rev. 19:11–15).

War is not just one among many themes in the Bible. It is *the* backdrop for the whole Story, the context for everything else. God is at war. He is trampling out the vineyards where the grapes of wrath are stored. And what is he fighting for? Our freedom and restoration. The glory of God is man fully alive. In the meantime, Paul says, *arm yourselves*, and the first piece of equipment he urges us to don is the belt of truth (Eph. 6:10–18). We arm ourselves by getting a good, solid grip on our situation, by getting some clarity on the battle over our lives. God's intentions toward us are life. Those intentions are opposed. Forewarned is forearmed, as the saying goes.

In *Mere Christianity*, in the chapter he so rightly titled “The Invasion,” C. S. Lewis tried to clarify our situation:

One of the things that surprised me when I first read the New Testament seriously was that it talked so much about a Dark Power in the universe—a mighty evil spirit who was held to be the Power behind death and disease, and sin. The difference is that Christianity thinks this Dark Power was created by God, and was good when he was created, and went wrong. Christianity agrees . . . this universe is at war.

## YOU MUST FIGHT FOR YOUR LIFE

Until we come to terms with *war* as the context of our days we will not understand life. We will misinterpret 90 percent of what is happening around us and to us. It will be very hard to believe that God’s intentions toward us are life abundant; it will be even harder not to feel that somehow we are just blowing it. Worse, we will begin to accept some really awful things about God. That four-year-old girl being molested by her daddy—that is “God’s *will*”? That ugly divorce that tore your family apart—God wanted that to happen too? And that plane crash that took the lives of so many—that was desired by God?

Most people get stuck at some point because God appears to have abandoned them. He is not coming through. Speaking about her life with a mixture of disappointment and cynicism, a young woman recently said to me, “God is rather silent right now.” Yes, it’s been awful. I don’t discount that for a moment. She is unloved; she is unemployed; she is under a lot. But her attitude strikes me as deeply naive, on the level of someone caught in a cross fire who asks, rather shocked and with a sense of betrayal, “God, why won’t you make them stop firing at me?” I’m sorry, but that’s not where

we are right now. It's not where we are in the Story. That day is coming, *later*, when the lion shall lie down with the lamb and we'll beat swords into plowshares. For now, it's bloody battle.

It sure explains a whole heckuva lot.

Before he promised us life, Jesus warned that a thief would try to steal, kill, and destroy it. How come we don't think that the thief then actually steals, kills, and destroys? You won't understand your life, you won't see clearly what has happened to you or how to live forward from here, unless you see it as *battle*. A war against your heart. And you are going to need your whole heart for what's coming next. I don't mean what's coming next in the story I'm telling. I mean what's coming next in the life you're living. There are a few things I know, and one thing I do know is this: we don't see things as clearly as we ought to. As we *need* to. We don't understand what's happening around us or to us or to those we love, and we are practically clueless when it comes to the weight of our own lives and the glory that's being . . . held back.

Some of you don't see it yet. That's all right. We have a whole book ahead of us. If it's true that there is a great and fierce battle unfolding all around us—and against us—why isn't the enemy more visible? And if there is a glory to my life, well, then, why don't I see *that*? Why do I struggle so much, and where is that life God offers?

We don't see clearly because we don't see with the eyes of our heart.