

CHAPTER 1

THE END IN SIGHT

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

—Romans 14:8

Jesus knew it would come to this. His life had been moving toward this moment: this stone pavement in Jerusalem and a Roman governor condemning him to death before a baying crowd—a crowd of people that he loved.

In his book *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, Fr. Richard John Neuhaus writes that “the way of the cross is the way of broken hearts.”¹ His body was broken and bleeding, but I suspect Jesus felt his heart break too. To experience the lack of love and understanding, the absence of mercy in the faces and voices of those calling out “Crucify him!” must have been as painful as the scourging whips.

Here the Lord of Life faced death. Jesus is wholly God, but he is also wholly human. And no human being desires pain or celebrates when death is imminent.

The Shadow of Death

How old were you when you first encountered death? The first I remember was the death of our pastor when I was eleven years old. Monsignor Donovan was a gentle man with a soft Irish brogue. He began all his homilies with “my dear brothers and sisters in Christ” and ended them with “and may God bless you.” He died of a heart

attack, and I cried myself to sleep the night we got the news. Now, all of a sudden, the priest who kept two lambs on the rectory grounds and who perpetually smiled was gone. That was what really shook me about death—the finality of it.

We walk through the valley of the shadow of death every day (see Psalm 23), but it's easy to forget about it. Until we get a phone call. Or an email. Or your doctor says, "I want more tests done." Or your spouse says, "I don't love you anymore." Or a child slams the door and walks out of your house and seemingly out of your life. Dreams punctured by the sting of rejection, friendships that decay, and relatives you don't speak to, even though you can't remember why, are all part of death. Death casts long shadows, and broken hearts come in many varieties.

"Come and Die"

Christian thought has long connected the idea of suffering and spiritual growth. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who resisted the Nazi regime, wrote, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."² C. S. Lewis, a British professor and lay theologian, wrote, "If you think of this world as a place intended simply for our happiness, you find it quite intolerable; think of it as a place of training and correction and it's not so bad."³

And that's part of the problem, isn't it? We don't *want* to come and die. We don't *want* correction. We don't *want* to suffer, and that makes complete sense, because we're hardwired to avoid pain.

But pain is also what wakes us up. Once the marriage dissolves, the phone call comes, or the friendship ends—that is, when we're in a position of brokenheartedness—we are much more amenable (at least in my experience) to reach out to God. The few times we talk to God when things are going well are too often with a sort of perfunctory, "Oh, thank God everything is happening the way I want

it!” But God wants more from us than just our thanks when things are the way we want them to be. He wants our whole hearts and our whole lives. Suffering is going to come but, with it, an opportunity to grow closer to God.

Suffering with Purpose

During his pontificate, Pope John Paul II wrote his apostolic letter *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering (Salvifici Doloris)*, which grapples with the idea of human suffering and how we as Christians, who believe in a loving God, can respond to it. I have found his words both comforting and challenging. In the beginning of the letter, the pope writes that “suffering’ seems to be particularly *essential to the nature of man*. . . . It can be said that man in a special fashion becomes the way for the Church when suffering enters his life. . . . In whatever form, suffering seems to be, and is, almost *inseparable from man’s earthly existence*” (SD 2, 3).

This isn’t anything new. Everyone knows we suffer, everyone knows we die, and everyone knows life isn’t fair. Thanks, Pope John Paul II, for pointing out the obvious! We suffer, and Jesus suffered. But how does that connect to us, today, in our very real suffering? The pope gives us an answer: “Every man has *his own share in the Redemption*. . . . In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ *has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption*. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ” (SD 19).

St. Paul also wrote about this shared suffering in his letter to the Philippians: “For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3:8). St. Paul knew what we all need to learn—that suffering is completely inseparable from being a Christian. You aren’t going to find a prosperity gospel preached here. Yet our suffering can be more than just

our personal pain: we don't have to lose ourselves in one big pity party. Instead, we can join our sorrows to the sufferings of Christ.

That doesn't mean, however, that Christians are, or should become, masochists. We're not actively *looking* for martyrdom or suffering. That's not good either. Yes, we're called to practice penance, but that doesn't mean we go looking for ways to make our lives harder just so we can suffer and get some sort of heavenly brownie points. We are called to accept what's given to us by God.

The more we are able to accept unavoidable suffering throughout our lives, the more comfortable we become with it, and the more comfortable we become with death. When we experience loss, pain, and suffering, we have an opportunity to practice acceptance by letting go of our desires and plans and submitting our will to the will of God. Death is the final surrender to God. By accepting God's will, we are rehearsing for that final acceptance—the day God calls us home.

Death Sentence

When I was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis (CF), I didn't consciously join my sufferings to Christ's. I wasn't some pint-sized saint. (I'm still not—pint-sized or a saint!) I didn't rejoice, but I didn't cry either. I just went along with what my parents and doctors and nurses told me to do. And after spending two weeks in the hospital for IV medications, education, and a battery of tests, I went back to school.

Outwardly, nothing was different. I still played clarinet in the band, still hated math class, and still loved to sing and read. But now I went to the nurse's office before lunch to get two enzymes from the bottle with my name on it that sat in her med drawer. Now I got early dismissals from school every three months to see my pulmonologist.

I knew from reading the encyclopedia that CF was fatal. I had been given my death sentence as surely as Jesus had been given his on the stone pavement that day in Jerusalem. But *life went on*. In the span of thirty-six hours, I'd been diagnosed with a fatal disease and was sitting in a strange hospital room, being poked with needles and facing an army of new terms, procedures, and vocabulary. *My* world had completely changed—but *the* world didn't seem to notice.

As If Nothing Happened

That's how it generally goes, isn't it? You get news that shatters your world to its core and smashes your heart into a million pieces. And yet you still have to do laundry and make dinner and put gas in the car. It was the same for Jesus. On that day in Jerusalem, people still had to earn a living, clean their homes for Passover, buy vegetables or fruits for dinner, get water at the well, tell their kids to stop fighting, and set the table.

But even if the world doesn't stop, Jesus does. He knows what we're going through when our hearts break. Jesus knows what it feels like to be judged, to lose everything, and to receive a death sentence. Let's not write that off too lightly. Let's not forget how intimately Jesus knows us and our human nature. As the letter to the Hebrews says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:15–16). In our heartbreak, we can go to the Lord, and he *wants* us to come to him. The question isn't whether Jesus is with us; the question is whether we will turn toward him or away from him in our pain.

When we find ourselves standing on our own stone pavements, and our lives are irrevocably changed, Jesus is standing there with us.

And when we find ourselves face-to-face with judgment and death or at the beginning of a difficult path we did not choose, the Son of God holds out his hand and says, "Let's begin the journey."

Will you?

Questions along the Way of Your Cross

1. When was the first time you experienced death? How old were you? Journal about that experience and how it's shaped the way you look at and experience death or loss.
2. Have you ever thought about your own death? Why or why not? What scares you about death?
3. Have you accepted Jesus' invitation to walk with him in times of suffering? If so, how? If not, how might you do that today?

CHAPTER 2

THE THINGS WE CARRY

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

—Mark 8:34–35

What Jesus tells his disciples here is shocking. Today, the phrase “take up your cross” has all the punch of a Catholic grandmother saying, “Offer it up for the souls in purgatory!” It’s become so familiar that we don’t really hear it anymore. But when Jesus spoke these words to his original audience, it was the equivalent of telling a twenty-first-century crowd to pull up an electric chair and sit down. Who wants to do that? Subject yourself to an instrument of death (and not just death but painful, agonizing, humiliating death) to follow this guy? No thanks.

Jesus’ words, however, always match his actions. He never asks us to do something that he isn’t willing to do himself. With his first steps toward Calvary, Jesus not only takes up his cross but does so willingly. This willingness is depicted beautifully in the 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*. There, Jesus embraces his Cross—falling down in front of it and wrapping his arms around it while one of the thieves rails at him, calling him a fool. But Jesus knew something the thief didn’t, something we often lose sight of—that his Cross is the Tree of Life. Remember what Jesus told his apostles: he had come to lay down his life for the sheep—for us. “For this reason the

Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it again” (Jn 10:17). Jesus will see out that charge until his very last breath.

Do Not Be Afraid

Well, that's all good and well for Jesus, you might object. He knew how the story was going to end. I have no idea how my story will end. I just know that death and suffering are going to come, and I'm not sure I can carry that.

That's a logical objection. Who would blindly follow someone into death and pain and torture? No one, right? But that's what happened when we were baptized. We are, after all, baptized into the death of Christ so that we can rise with him. It's also what happens when we decide to take our Christian faith personally. We choose to follow Jesus anywhere he leads us, and often, he leads us right to the Cross. But at the same time, Jesus also tells us not to be afraid, not to let our hearts be troubled (see John 14:27).

In short—we're supposed to trust him. Deeply. Every step of the way. While we're struggling to carry our crosses. And of course, we don't know the way. But then again, neither did the disciples. Thomas asked Jesus that at the Last Supper: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (Jn 14:5). But we have an advantage over Thomas. We know that the end of every Christian story is eternal life with Jesus (we hope). Heaven, after all, is our goal. But to get to heaven, we have to die, and because we have to die, we ought to think about death.

Nonnegotiable

If we want heaven, then the Cross is nonnegotiable and so is the Way of the Cross. If we want the fullest life, life forever with Christ, then we have to set our sights there and prepare for it. Athletes know this. If you want to be in the Olympics, you can't just dream about it, read

Runner's World magazine, and plod around the neighborhood a few times a week. Your entire life has to revolve around reaching your goal—how you sleep, how you eat, how you train, and even how you rest. As Christians, we're called to do no less. I can't think of a single saint who got to heaven just by thinking nice thoughts and going to Mass once a week. It doesn't work that way. As St. Rose of Lima said, "Apart from the cross, there is no other way to get to heaven."

So, yes, we have to think about death. We have to keep our goal in sight, and that means we have to stop turning away from the instruments of death to self and sin in our lives and start learning how to embrace them. Follow St. Paul's admonishment: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, *but we an imperishable one*" (1 Cor 9:24–25; emphasis added).

Suffering for Good

Yet learning to acknowledge the reality of death will not be easy. Crosses aren't meant to be easy. We will struggle with them. We will fall under the weight of them. They will dig into our shoulders, and carrying them will hurt. In other words, we will suffer. Why? John Paul II has an answer. "It can be said that man suffers whenever *he experiences any kind of evil*. . . . We could say that man suffers *because of a good* in which he does not share. . . . He particularly suffers when he 'ought'—in the normal order of things—to have a share in this good and does not have it" (SD 7).

Single people who want to get married feel the lack of a spouse because marriage is a good thing. People who are sick suffer for lack of health. Divorced people suffer the lack of a loving marriage. Couples who long to have a child but struggle with infertility suffer because having children is a good thing. Suffering is not an evil *in*

itself, but it *is* the result of some sort of evil in our lives, whether it's biological evil (a disease), emotional evil (betrayal or the failure of a relationship), or some other sort.

Whether visible or invisible, everyone has a cross. In my life I've suffered many misunderstandings or assumptions from other people because I looked healthy. People didn't understand why I had a handicapped placard for my car when I appeared perfectly able-bodied. These days, people don't understand why I don't answer their questions because they can't see the cochlear implant that's tucked under my hair. They don't know that I'm hearing impaired, so misunderstandings arise. All of these are part of my cross, and everyone's cross is multifaceted. It's usually not just *one* thing that hurts as we drag our crosses through our lives. It's multiple things.

No One to Blame

It's important to remember, too, that suffering is hardly ever caused by something we did. Certainly, our choices have consequences and our actions can cause suffering. But a cross is not some cosmic punishment from God. "*It is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has a nature of a punishment,*" John Paul II writes (SD 11). And Jesus says the same thing in the Gospel of John: "As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him'" (Jn 9:1–3).

Again, the cross is *not* a punishment from God, although it can seem that way, because the cross is an instrument of death. There's no happy connotation to a cross—*unless* we look at it as the instrument of our salvation, as the Tree of Life.