

P R E F A C E

Six years ago I had a near-death experience that shook me to my core. Why? It was because I assumed that I was a good Christian because I was doing all I *thought* was required of me. In the horrible moments when I felt life slipping away, the realization that I had completely missed it hit home—hard. That feeling is simply indescribable with mere words. An agonizing scream would be much more appropriate.

My life was given back to me, and in the days, weeks, months, and years that followed my near-death experience, I had to answer some really tough questions. Where had I gone wrong? What happened? What does it *really* mean to be an authentic Christian? What if what I thought was good enough was not even close? This soul-searching has been very painful to my Christian ego, and it is by no means over.

It seems to me that when people read a book, they expect the author to have written the book because he or she is an expert in the subject matter. Trust me on this one: I have certainly not “arrived” spiritually. *Nobody* has arrived yet. In this life, we all see through a glass darkly, meaning that the *full* revelation of Jesus is hidden (1 Cor. 13:12). However, as we grow, we go from faith to faith, glory

to glory, and revelation to revelation, and as we climb the ladder of faith and reach new heights, we are able to see more. Many get excited when they are in that new place and forget there are higher places to go and more rungs on the ladder to climb. If *anyone* tells you he or she has God and Christianity all figured out—that he or she knows all the answers and is doing things exactly right—run from that person.

No, friends, I have not at all arrived, and neither do I consider myself an expert. In fact, it will be obvious to you as you read that this book is not an expository study on any particular subject. Rather, it is simply a set of confessions based on areas where I completely missed it. I still have much to learn. In fact, the more I learn, the more I realize I need to know. It's funny how I can stand at one point, look behind me, and be extremely grateful for how far I've grown in God but look the other direction and be almost overwhelmed with frustration about how much farther I have to grow. Again, the purpose of this book is not to claim I have all the answers; I don't. It is simply to bare my soul, admit my mistakes, and chronicle some of the corrections I have had to make in my own life, so I will not make them again. I wrote it as a reminder to myself and published it with the thought that maybe—just maybe—there are people out there who unknowingly have fallen into the same traps as I did. Even if this book only helps one person, that's still one person who will be able to make the necessary adjustments *now*, before he or she stands before God with a virtually fruitless life.

In the book I submit several, “What if...?” questions that are much easier to ignore than they are to pause and consider. My hope is that this book will cause you to think and that you take those thoughts to an honest conversation between you and God. Study tools which will help foster this conversation can be found at **RudeAwakeningBook.com**.

CHAPTER 1

Back to Square One

For years I dreamed about going to the ocean. It beckoned to me. When I would see pictures or videos of a tranquil sunset or raging surf, it intensified the draw. There was, is, and always will be an insatiable fascination with the sea that comes from a place deep down inside me. There is something about the power, the magnitude, the mystery, and the sound of it. As a lover of all wildlife, I am awed by the beauty that lies beneath the water and captivated by the element of exploration. As a child, I never had the privilege of swimming in the ocean. Now, after hours of swimming and taking pictures of fish, crabs, stingrays, and such with a disposable underwater camera, I sat under a beach umbrella with my wife by my side, a huge grin on my face. My boyish excitement could barely be contained.

“Hey, Mark, how far do you think it is to that buoy?” she curiously asked.

“I don’t know, two hundred yards—maybe a little more or less,” I answered.

“Think you could swim out there?” she replied. Having already been to the ocean several times in her life, she was enjoying watching me make up for lost time.

“Oh, I’m sure I could.” I proudly boasted, “I have swum five hundred meters at the Y without any problem.”

I failed to consider the fact that pool water is very different from swimming against the waves in the ocean. I also failed to consider that, having been less active due to knee surgery, I was forty pounds heavier than when I frequented the YMCA. A dangerous combination of pride and inexperience baited me, and I bit.

I set out toward the buoy. Despite being tired from a fun-filled day of exploration, the adrenaline rush of attempting something new and exciting fueled me. I walked until I could no longer touch bottom and then started swimming. I realized right away that swimming *against* the waves was draining my energy much faster than I had anticipated, and the actual distance I needed to cover was farther than I had guessed. About halfway to the buoy, I felt myself getting tired and out of breath. I considered turning back, but then I thought, *The buoy floats, so even if I am tired, I can hold onto the buoy when I get there and rest.* So I kept going. Then I began getting *very* tired...tired enough that I knew I *had to* get to the buoy because I might not make it back if I turned around.

There is a weightlifting technique called lifting to failure where the subject does repetitions until he or she can lift no more. Then the weight is reduced and the person again lifts to failure, and so on. The weightlifter ends up with just the bar—no weights—and it’s the hardest thing to lift because there is just nothing left in the muscles. Working one’s muscles to the point of failure is a good workout technique, but it is a very bad thing to have happen when one is swimming alone—and the point of failure was fast approaching for me.

By the time I got to the buoy three or four minutes later, my

arms felt like they were full of cold molasses. To my utter dismay, when I tried to grab the buoy, I could not stay on. It was slimy and moved around in the waves, and each wave that hit me knocked me off. I realized very quickly I was not going to make it. I looked back at the shore. Nobody was in earshot, and even if they were, they would not make it to me in time. I tried to grab the buoy again and was knocked off another time...and another. I felt panic set in like a dark cloud around me. Colors, smells, and sounds all intensified as I felt death grab me by the ankles and pull. I was so out of breath that the only prayer I could muster was a breathy, "Father!" It was guttural and desperate.

I tried once more to grab onto the buoy. This time I was able to wrap my legs around the cable and obtain the leverage necessary to bear hug the buoy itself. Several seconds later, I realized the waves were smaller. For a brief moment I was able to work on catching my breath, but then I looked toward shore again. It seemed like such a long way back, and I had no strength left. Panic set in again as another wave turned me, so I let go with one hand to instinctively push down, lost my grip with the other, and then frantically pushed down with both.

In retrospect, I now realize how dangerous it is to attempt to save people who are drowning because they are in a panic zone and will push down on whatever they can, including the person trying to save them, so they can remain above water. I recognized I was panicking and repeated to myself out loud, "Don't panic, don't panic, don't panic." I successfully grabbed the buoy again and worked on catching my breath. My arms and chest were beginning to cramp up and Charlie-horse to the point where just holding on was painful. I knew I was inevitably going to die, but at least I had a little time to think and prepare.

As I savored my remaining time to live, I went through several intense waves of emotion. I felt an incredible sense of anger at myself for not using the wisdom and sense God gave me. It saddened and embarrassed me to think that I would be remem-

bered as someone who died as a result of doing something stupid. I thought about my wife, and grief poured over me because I knew that not only would I be unable to help her through the pain, but I would also be the one responsible for inflicting it. I remembered the camera I had with me and considered taking a good-bye picture in hopes that someone would find it and give it to my wife. I did not know whether that would make things better or worse. I decided against it.

I simply could not believe that this was the way I was going to go. Yes, I was angry with myself. Yes, I was grieving over the eminent pain my wife would soon experience. However, neither emotion even came close to the rude awakening that hit me with regard to my supposed Christian walk. Words to describe it fall so short, but suffice it to say that I was overwhelmed with a sense of shame and embarrassment because I knew I had lived nowhere near my full potential in God. I knew in my heart that I would go to Heaven, but I was ashamed for letting my passion for Jesus fizzle to the point where I was just going through the motions. I felt like Jesus would greet me with something somewhere between, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” and “Depart from me for I never knew you.” Maybe it would be something like, “Mark who? Hmmm. Sounds vaguely familiar. Let’s talk.” Worse yet, I felt that I had nothing—I had done nothing—to show for my life... *nothing*. There was a sickening horror to those moments because I knew that was it. There would be no second chances, no do-overs, and no excuses.

Maybe as you read through the previous paragraph, you made the assumption that I was backslidden and reassured yourself that *you* are doing just fine. You be the judge, based on the following:

- I read my Bible every day.
- I prayed every day.
- I praised and worshipped God every day.
- I attended church twice a week and was an active volunteer.
- I tithed cheerfully and even gave offerings above my tithe.

- I walked in love by being kind to others.
- I gave money to various charities that help the poor.
- I witnessed to people now and then.
- I did not cuss or even gossip.
- I did not use tobacco, drink alcohol, or use illegal drugs.
- I had always been faithful to my wife.

Based on the above, would you say I was backslidden? After all, these are the defining marks of a Christian, right? Many of you would probably say yes. I thought so too.

I was wrong.

It had been about ten minutes since I had arrived at the buoy. Panic had hit me four times, and each time I had spoken it away. I had pretty much caught my breath, but my muscles were so cramped it was like I was frozen in the clinging position. I fully realized I was just delaying the inevitable, so I figured I would at least die fighting. I knew I had to take off and attempt to get as close to the shore as possible. That way, maybe, just maybe, I could be retrieved and revived. I took a deep breath, let go of the buoy, and started swimming again. I was only able to swim about twenty seconds and then had to float on my back and kick because my arms just would not work anymore. I did that for a little while, and then my legs began to give out, so I turned over and swam with my arms again but this time for less than ten seconds. Then I flipped over and kicked again.

I looked up at the sky and wondered what it would feel like to have my spirit separate from my body and whether I would be granted any kind of pause in midair to watch and see whether anyone noticed my body. I knew this next swimming sprint would be my last. I knew that if my feet did not touch bottom when I could move no more, that would be it.

I gulped a deep breath, turned over, and just swam for my life. I swam for my wife. I swam for the future children we could have.

I swam for the people God wanted me to touch in my lifetime. I swam until my arms and legs had nothing left and my muscles felt like they were being ripped from the bone. When I reached the point where my muscles could not move any longer, and with everything on the line, I tried to touch bottom.

The overwhelming feeling I had when I touched sand with the tips of my toes simply cannot be adequately expressed with words. It was the most beautiful feeling one could imagine. It meant life. It meant hope. It meant another chance to be all God had planned for me to be. With my toes in the sand, my face stretched skyward to keep the water out of my mouth, my heart beating so fast I thought it would explode, and tears of joy falling across my temples, I gasped for each quick breath. I was too tired to even speak, but my spirit man was screaming, alternating between, "Thank you!" and "I'm sorry!"

It took me a *long* time to walk in to shore because I could barely move. My knees felt so weak and shaky that it was difficult to even stand, much less walk. I acted like I was looking for fish to photograph because I did not want my wife to know I had been in trouble. When I finally made it out of the water, I looked down and saw that I was bleeding. There were barnacles on the buoy that had cut my chest, and the cable had cut my leg. I realized that I had been out in deep water—bleeding—for probably ten minutes and God had kept the sharks away. Each breath I took caused pain to shoot from what seemed like each individual rib, yet every breath of life was so sweet.

My wife smiled when she saw me approaching, but her smile quickly faded into concern when she saw the blood. I told her I was fine. Then I walked back to the condo where we were staying and attempted to get cleaned up for dinner. Showering was a struggle because I could not lift my arms. I had to put one hand under the opposite elbow to wash my hair. I struggled to eat as well because I could barely lift my fork. The meal strengthened me enough that later in the evening I decided to tell my wife what had happened. She reacted like I thought she would: she blamed herself for even

asking me about swimming out to the buoy, she was angry with me for trying it, and she was upset about almost losing me.

I purposefully did not mention the rude awakening I had experienced. This was because I knew she would say, "What? You're one of the best Christians I know!" I knew, based on her reaction, that I might start trying to convince myself things were not all that bad and that maybe much of my reaction was rooted in a fear of dying. I knew better. That experience was the fifth time in my life I had almost died. I had experienced bodily trauma before. The most recent of those experiences had occurred shortly after I graduated from Bible school ten years prior. It hurt physically, but I felt a calmness and confidence in my spirit. I was ready then. Not this time.

The next morning I awakened shortly before sunrise. We would be leaving soon and decided to take a walk on the beach alone. I watched the waves roll in. I stared at the buoy and took several pictures. I replayed the previous day's event in my mind and vowed never to forget. Tears flowed freely. I prayed, "God...Hi...I don't really know where to begin. Thank You for rescuing me. Thank You for giving me another chance. I don't know where I went wrong. I don't know what happened. I thought I was living a life that would please You and make You proud of me. God, please reveal to me what I did wrong. No matter how painful it is, I want You to show me where I missed it so I can change things. I should be dead right now, but You saved me. I am not my own. I am Yours. Change me. Rearrange me. Strip me down. Chasten me. Clean out all the junk. I commit myself to this no matter what it costs. I don't care what people think of me; I only care what You think of me. Break me down and rebuild me from the ground up. Here I am. I am willing. I am ready."

Friends, that is a very dangerous prayer to pray because God *will* take you up on it. It has indeed been a very painful journey but in a good way. And of course, the journey is not over. This is a learning process that will be lifelong. When I prayed that prayer on the beach and said, "I am ready," I meant it. The morning after my wife and I arrived home, I got up at 3:00 a.m., brewed some coffee, went outside in the

backyard, sat in a lawn chair, looked at the stars, and simply listened. Another way of saying it is that I shut up. It had been a long time since I had gotten quiet before the Lord and given Him a chance to speak. I got up at the same time the next day and the next and did so daily for almost a year. Six years later, I still get up early, but not *that* early. (You'll understand why as you continue to read the book.)

God answered my original prayer on the beach. Little by little, He started showing me what went wrong. He took me back to the basics, and I began journaling about things I was learning because I wanted to be able to refer back to it and remind myself so I would never, ever get off track again. Three years into the process, I started seeing a pattern and flow to what I was learning, and then I felt the Lord leading me to put it in book form. I resisted big time. Most of my friends do not know about my near-drowning experience. They still have a very good impression of me. But on the beach, I told God I did not care what people thought of me; I only cared what He thought. Maybe admitting my shortcomings will cause some people to think less of me. So be it. I have to trust that God knows what He is doing and that maybe this book will help people.

What about you? Before you take a two-second inventory of your life as a Christian and come up with an answer of, "I'm doing fine," on what are you basing that answer? On *your* opinion? On your pastor's or youth pastor's opinion? On your friends' opinions? On what members of your church would say? On what the overall Christian community would think? I am absolutely confident that every single person who might have spoken about me—privately or publicly—at my funeral would have said I was a model Christian. With that in mind, consider this: *What if everything you thought you were doing right was actually wrong?* How would you know? Would you even want to know? I invite you to explore "right" with me, using this book as a starting point. (It is by no means an exhaustive expository.) Why? Once you pass from this life and stand before God, there is *no going back and changing things*. The time to take serious inventory is now, today, while you still have a chance to change.

(Chapter One continues...)