

# Ransomed

**One Man's Journey**  
*out of Darkness into*  
**the Light of Truth**

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# INTRODUCTION

“I AM the Truth that you’ve been searching for!”

My body shook from the force, and I immediately burst into weeping. Joy unspeakable overpowered me, and I was lost in amazed wonderment. Somehow, I managed to pull the car over to the side of the road, where I sat sobbing and heaving great bursts of pent-up emotion. I was lost in joy and completely oblivious to the scene I must have been making. Great waves of heavenly love kept pouring and crashing over me, and as they did, the debris of hopelessness and despair were washed away.

I suddenly knew that the Source of everything that existed, or that ever would exist, knew me, knew my name, and loved me with a power so irresistible that it transformed everything that fell within its gaze—a gaze that was now fixed on me.

In the span of seconds, already, I had experienced a profound rejuvenation. Far more than a psychic healing or divine epiphany—though it was both of these—all the most important questions I

had ever asked were suddenly answered and in a way that surpassed my highest hopes.

I had found the *one* Truth.

## WHY THIS BOOK?

I'm not gratuitous with my Christian faith. Reserved by nature, I don't readily volunteer it to strangers. This may explain, at least in part, why it's taken so long for me to write about the extraordinary events—mentioned briefly above—that serve as this book's inspiration. So why have I written it now?

With advancing years has come a sense of urgency. Unbeknown to most, there's a war being waged over people's souls. Fought in the heavenlies, the combatants in this contest are real, determined, and committed to the end. In the center are unwitting humans mostly asleep to the reality around them.

I admit to being surprised by most people's ambivalence toward death and what follows it. Undisturbed preoccupation with this life, it seems, makes for eternal carelessness. But as the seventeenth century Anglican clergyman, John Tillotson, warned, "He who takes care for this life but takes no care for eternity is wise for a moment and a fool forever." While the very young may be forgiven this error the mature have no excuse and a central aim of this book is to shake the indifferent from their slumber. Our lives are vapors. Eternity awaits us whether we care for it or not. The only question is where we will spend it.

My hope for this book is that it inspires the spiritually indifferent, of whatever age, to not merely "care for" eternity, but to care deeply for it. As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, *we persuade men*" (2 Cor. 5:11, emphasis added). To this end *Ransomed* is a compilation, albeit

an abbreviated one, of what could have been several books given the range of topics that are touched upon, but that for the sake of economy are addressed within this compact volume.

Part I describes my personal journey to faith in Christ. While every faith journey is unique, and uniquely precious, mine is arguably distinctive owing to its supernatural character. And if my story helps to lure the spiritually thirsty to press on to the more objective discussion in Part II, then it will have served its purpose. Part II is longer and denser as it seeks to accomplish three related goals: (1) to encourage the honest, but searching, skeptic to “reason” their way to belief in God, (2) to explain the nature of Biblical salvation and why we all need it, and (3) to help overcome objections to placing one’s trust in God raised by the existence of evil and suffering and what are known as the Bible’s “hard passages.”

Another aim of this book is to encourage those already in the faith. Despite Christianity’s supernatural character, the faithful live their lives mostly in the ordinary. Extraordinary encounters, if they’re experienced at all, are usually brief and separated by long periods of relative normalcy. That has certainly been my experience. The life of the believer is not a sprint from one supernatural encounter to the next, it’s a trust marathon. Not for nothing does the writer of Hebrews exhort believers to “run with endurance the race set before us” (Heb. 12:1). Indeed, I hold special admiration for my fellow Christians who, having never experienced what most think of as a divine encounter, show by their character the veracity of their faith. Still, there is encouragement in the lived experience of others, and particularly from those who’ve had close contact with the spirit realm and lived to tell of it. For this reason, I hope that my story, along with the lessons drawn from it, provides encouragement to my fellow pilgrims along our shared walk of

faith. If my story stands for anything, it's that the God of the Bible lives and is ever attentive to the cry of those who seek Him.

Finally, I've written this book out of a combination of obedience and gratitude. Obedience to share what I believe God did not intend for me to keep private. Gratitude for the life, or more accurately, the "newness of life" that the Author of life died to give me, and not only me, but all those willing to receive it.

## **A PERSONAL INVITATION**

If you've ever felt the weight of unanswered questions pressing on your soul, if you've doubted whether your life has meaning, if you've sought fulfillment in things that have left you empty, this book is for you. If you're a religious skeptic but can't ignore that persistent and nagging sense that life has to be about more than simply, "eat, drink, and be merry"—this book is also for you. I pray that in these pages you will find not only encouragement but that you, too, will encounter the One who sees you, knows you, and loves you beyond imagining.

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?" (Luke 15:4).

PART 1

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# THE JOURNEY

## Chapter 1

# ALIEN INVASION

*“Now the man from whom the demons had departed begged Him that he might be with Him. But Jesus sent him away, saying, “Return to your own house, and tell what great things God has done for you.”*

—Luke 8:38–39

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**P**eople expect to be happy. Misfortune, we tell ourselves, is a kind of glitch, an anomaly in the natural order, and that by following some basic rules—working hard, getting a good education, eating right and so on—that it’s possible to avoid most of life’s snares. This belief is especially common in affluent societies where avoiding pain is seen as a basic human right. Drug abuse, abortion on demand, no-fault divorce, and the modern welfare state are each, in some sense, a response to this thinking.

The ultimate tragedy is the life of unfulfilled dreams, or so we've come to believe.

But life is a storm. The darkness descends, the tempest rises, and our feeble sense of security reels from adversity's inevitable and cruel assault. Whatever its source, pain is always an intruder—an unwelcome interruption to what we want to believe is the natural way of things: the absence of pain. Most everyone can abide momentary affliction, even when, like a heart attack, the pain is intense. But sustained suffering—prolonged and unremitting—brings to its victims a strange separation, an estrangement from the smiling faces and fair land they too once belonged to, but which now is viewed from afar. One of the universal effects of suffering is to make its victims exiles.

Pain is easier to bear when there's a known reason for it. We accept that chronic smoking causes cancer, and that laziness leads to poverty. It's hard not to feel more sympathy for an AIDS patient stricken through a blood transfusion than for one who contracted it through reckless sex. More vexing is suffering brought on by malice—the frivolous lawsuit, spiteful words, getting punched in the face. More difficult still is arbitrary, indiscriminate, suffering. Pain without meaning is the cruelest foe.

Yet whether from violence, economic collapse, loneliness, Alzheimer's, or cancer in all its vexatious and inexplicable forms, misery stalks us all. Suffering is the grim shadow no one fully escapes. And when our time inevitably comes, we cannot help but ask, "Why is this terrible thing happening, and happening to me?"

Rarely are those cries answered. Yet every now and then something extraordinary happens. The cry for help is heard. Heaven answers, and the veil, as it were, is lifted from our eyes. The dark sky rolls back, light bursts forth and there revealed—though it had been there all along—is a new country, vast and beautiful. Looking

up, joy rushes in and we behold the one thing our tormented souls most crave—the Truth.

I know because it happened to me.

## EARLY YEARS

I was born in Oakland, California during the post-WWII boom years. My parents, both Minnesota transplants, had moved west several years earlier with my older sister. My father worked in local government and job changes meant frequent moves. For some reason I was particularly affected by these uprootings and came to loathe them. By the time I was eleven I'd lived in a series of towns before moving again—this time to Fresno, a community some ninety miles south of Sacramento in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley.

Back then, Fresno was a medium-sized city wedged inauspiciously between CA-99 which runs along the California spine and the gentle foothills of the magnificent Sierra Nevada. Originally built on agriculture, by the 1960s the city struggled for a civic identity. Blackstone Avenue, the main thoroughfare, was a calamitous mix of lawnmower repair shops, bait-and-tackle stores, strip-mall restaurants, and car dealerships. Spreading north from a haphazard city center were the slowly expanding suburbs.

Though the city enjoyed a cosmopolitan mix of ethnic diversity, it lacked a unifying theme. Its one redeeming quality was, and arguably still is, that it sat astride one of most beautiful mountain ranges in the world. It took a while, but as a young boy beginning to taste the wonder of adolescence, I came to love it.

## THE ANNOUNCEMENT

By my junior year in high school, I'd achieved a certain preferred social standing among my peers. In the summer, when not scheming on fresh-faced girls, my friends and I would backpack through the pristine Sierra wilderness. During the winter months, with the season's crisp mornings and dense tulle fog, we looked forward to football games, weekend partying, and skiing Razorback at China Peak.

The year was 1969. Neil Armstrong landed on the moon, the "Summer of Love" was in full bloom at Woodstock, and the world felt bright with promise. I was living the movie, *American Graffiti*, and the happiest I'd ever been.

But it was all about to change.

It began when my father made an unexpected announcement around the dinner table one night. Choosing his words carefully, he began explaining that he'd taken another job some three hundred miles to the south to a place called Orange County and that soon we'd all be moving there. "We can live close to the ocean," he exclaimed. "The weather is sunny all year round. There are plenty of mountains nearby—not as big as the ones here, but you can still ski. And besides all that—there's Disneyland!" Notwithstanding his enthusiastic spin, our crestfallen faces told all. A collective gloom fell upon the table as we proceeded to discuss the impending, drastic, change in our lives. For me especially, southern California sounded like a penal colony.

## THE MOVE

The day appointed for us to move was a spectacularly clear, cold January morning. We'd decided to have a "last meal" downtown at

the International House of Pancakes. From the restaurant window the Sierras stood massive across the eastern horizon, their snow-capped peaks beckoning. It was brightly beautiful and vividly incongruous with the unhappy mood that hung thick around our pastel linoleum table. Months earlier my father had moved to prepare the way. Now it was our turn. The moving truck was gone and there was nothing left to do. Staring at the faces of our little tribe, it occurred to me that we never more ready—or more unprepared—at the same time.

Six hours later we pulled off the I-5 Freeway and into Anaheim. It was mid-afternoon and muggy. A cloud of yellowish smog hung low in the air. Within minutes of exiting the car, I felt a sting in my lungs. The restaurant where we'd planned to meet my father was a few miles from Disneyland, on Euclid Boulevard. It reminded me of Blackstone Avenue in Fresno—except for one unavoidable distinction. There was no escape. We were hemmed in, surrounded by hundreds of square-miles of freeways, gray industrial buildings, and the unending, ever-expanding mass of humanity. It was a concrete wasteland of immense proportion, and Orange Country—squeezed like a sardine between Los Angeles and San Diego—was smack in the middle of it.

My parents had bought a house in one of the ubiquitous new subdivisions springing up in the region. It wasn't finished yet, so our temporary home was a local motel that sat squat among a hodgepodge forest of obtrusive signage and low-slung strip malls along Harbor Blvd in Fullerton. Since we had moved during Christmas break, at least I wouldn't have to face the inevitable challenge of a new school for another couple of weeks.

With nothing to do but watch TV and walk the dilapidated storefronts along Harbor, I passed the time eating donuts at BB's and cultivating a slow-boiling bitterness.

The two-story home we finally moved into was part of a development in the bedroom community of Placentia set down in what used to be a grove of orange trees. Not many citrus trees were left in Placentia, or for that matter, any trees at all. North Orange County, or so it seemed to me, suffered a blight of colorless uniformity. The natural topology was denuded of mature trees to clear a profitable path for development fueled mostly by the aerospace boom. A surfeit of defense related jobs brought plenty of affordable housing, but at the expense of any regard for natural beauty. The neighborhood we lived in was a monotonous collage of beige cinderblock and cement. Ironically, the perpetually sunny weather only made things worse. The temperature never seemed to drift more than a few degrees from 80, even in winter, except when the Santa Ana's blew which could send the mercury to over a hundred. In sticky contrast to the crisp air of mid-winter Fresno, the balmy weather only compounded my already acute sense of tedium.

## **FITTING IN**

Like the neighborhood surrounding it, Eldorado High School was new and, to my embittered way of thinking, suffered the same bare and uninspiring repetitiveness as the rest of north Orange County. Already, I had resolved not to make any effort to fit in. So, I was a bit taken back by the friendliness and easy acceptance of my peers, so different a reception from what I'd expected.

For a town originally built by farmers, Fresno was peculiar in that a good percentage of its citizens adopted behaviors seemingly designed to mimic a brand of Hollywood cool. This was particularly true among high schoolers.

All newcomers were forced, as I had been, to earn their place among the preferred class. For girls, beauty alone conferred the

desired recognition. Boys had it tougher. You had to prove up some gift, an alpha trait others envied or minimally could not deny, having a way with the opposite sex, athletic prowess, swagger, street toughness. Whatever, you had to stand out.

The coolest boys were those envied few who matched ruddy good looks, physical courage, and a persona of unflappable, stoic, confidence—a charisma.

In Fresno, though I may not have been an alpha male in the eyes of my high school peers, I could at least count them as my friends. The irony was that the status I lamented having to prove all over again at Eldorado, I now imposed on those around me. I took definite pride in standing aloof from the feckless schoolmates I was now forced to suffer.

I didn't particularly care about making new friends because my goal was to escape, to get back to my old life. But that was impossible. So, I retreated behind a carefully constructed wall of subtle animosity I carried with me constantly. It didn't matter what new opportunities opened or how friendly my peers were. The resentment I harbored was directed toward my circumstances, surroundings, and classmates. Ingratitude, coupled with bitterness, were my two closest companions. Brick by carefully laid brick, I cultivated these destructive states of mind until one day it all came crashing down.

## INVASION

It happened in the early afternoon as I was walking the perpetually sunny corridors of Eldorado. The day was like any other. Ever with me was the poisonous "I hate this place" attitude when, suddenly, I was overpowered by a flood of mental anguish. Coming out of nowhere, it rolled over me like a black tsunami. In less than a second

I was plunged into a sickening gray gloom. Reeling from the blow my stomach turned and I felt I was going to vomit. The effect of it on my conscious mind was immediate, appalling, and amplified by the peculiar awareness that I was responsible. Somehow, I was made aware that the resentment I'd harbored over a relatively insignificant life event had been a terrible miscalculation.

*"Play with fire, and this is what you get,"* a voice seemed to say.

I literally shook my head in a hapless attempt to shake off the conscious assault. But it was too late. Whatever psychological faculty I'd possessed to experience inner harmony had been savaged.

The initial assault, the realization of my error, and the knowledge that already I had lost strategic psychological terrain all happened in the span of a second or two. The attack brought with it a hyper sense of self-awareness coupled with a morbid gloom. It was as if a protective mental shield I'd never before been conscious of was now peeled away and for the first time I was acutely alone with my own thoughts.

Yet far from producing a sense of enlightenment or self-discovery, this preternatural inward focus was profoundly discomfiting. Too late was I made to realize what a fool I'd been, blithely toying with forces beyond my comprehension. Like the spindly legs of a spider my once pat solutions to life were ruthlessly cut from under me and I was suddenly confronted with the depth of my ignorance.

Whatever convictions and confidence I'd once had were now turned on end, and for the first time, I feared the future instead of eagerly looking forward to it.

For several weeks I groped about in a state of terrifying shock. Had I suffered a nervous breakdown? Is this what it felt like to be mentally ill? Was I the victim of misfired neurons or brain chemicals run amok? Would I recover? How? When? I felt a horrific

sense of isolation. The mere fact that such conscious pain could even exist was, to my naïve and fragile mind, a horrifying revelation. Given the choice, I would have preferred cancer or some other dread disease. At least then my mind would be free. As it was, I was imprisoned inside a psychic vacuum devoid of joy. Try as I did to appreciate the beauty around me, to experience any sense of peace, it was denied me. Whatever had taken up residence, the effect was such that my inner world was submerged in a pall of deep shadow. My very thoughts were anguished, and there was no way—except through sleep—to escape them.

## IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

In time, I began to ponder questions I'd never before considered. What is joy? Where does it come from? Is there any objective value to being happy? Why am I here anyway? Is there a purpose to life? How can I discover it? A typical teenager before the assault, I had never devoted much thought to life's pressing questions. Now they consumed me.

I became increasingly unnerved by the consequences of my previously unexamined and self-serving worldview. Why should anyone expect to enjoy contentment or peace of mind? Wasn't the sense of well-being merely a biological effect, the product of deterministic forces caused by some cosmic accident? In my case, the accident resulted in mental pain. Maybe I was pre-wired for it. What did it matter? It was no good bemoaning my bad luck because concepts like good and bad only had meaning if they were rooted in something real—something beyond myself.

Before the attack, I'd never had a reason to question the moral and psychological implications of what philosophers, I would later learn, called materialism. And pondering such dark epiphanies

now left me emotionally depleted. Still, I brooded over them with increasing earnestness. I had to have something to hope in, so I resisted, with all the emotional defenses a sixteen-year-old could muster, the cold logic of a purposeless world.

As the months wore on, I kept my anguished condition to myself. This was partly out of embarrassment—I didn't think I could bear any association with labels like "mentally ill" or "clinically depressed." Then too, I had the strong suspicion that not much help would come from other people, so why open a can of worms.

One day, though, I decided to risk a query to my father.

## ABANDONED TRADITIONS

During my early years my parents had presented themselves as nominal Catholics. This was not surprising since both sets of grandparents showed devotion to the church. When finances permitted, I was sent to parochial schools and attended mass regularly. Catholicism gave me a conceptual, though limited, understanding of the Christian God.

The remoteness of the black-robed nuns who issued from the hushed and enigmatic confines of candle-lit convents, the obligatory visits to the confessional with their predictable rites of penance, the ubiquitous statues that I feared held some holy power, and the specter of the Latin liturgy—together created in me a welter of emotions: mystery, awe, boredom. None of which, at least for me, was particularly faith-building.

My maternal grandmother, Marie, was the most devout Catholic I knew. But as a child, to me she reflected the same distant and cold disposition as did the rest of the church. Also, I couldn't help but notice that few others in our family, and none

of our Catholic friends, appeared to take their faith very seriously. If we performed the sacraments at all, it was out of perfunctory homage to a passed-on tradition.

A few years after we moved to Fresno my grandmother Marie died, and with her death, it seemed, so did the collective pretense of my family's faith. Soon afterwards, we stopped attending mass. I was thirteen. One day, out of curiosity, I asked my father why we'd stopped going. "Well," he replied with his usual candor, "your mother and I talked about it and realized we just didn't believe it anymore." "So, we stopped going."

And that was that.

## ON HAPPINESS

In time, the idea of a Supreme Being became irrelevant. God was a non-issue. If someone had asked what I believed about eternal-matters—which, of course, they never did—I probably would have shrugged my shoulders. The truth was, I hadn't thought about God for years, and as far as I could tell, neither had anyone else within my family circle. So when finally I asked my father what he thought about the nature of happiness, his response was predictably utilitarian.

"Happiness," he offered, "comes from setting goals and seeing them through. It's a product of accomplishment, satisfaction in a life well run."

Of course, his answer was true as far as it went. But I immediately understood that, like most people, my father's perception of happiness was as a kind of emotional layer of frosting atop an underlying foundation of basic mental well-being, an inner quiet, that to the undisturbed mind is assumed. The problem was my mind was anything but quiet. My very thoughts were submerged

in a dark, colorless void. Accomplishment and goal-setting were fine and well, but they meant nothing unless and until I could discover what difference any of it made. I needed an anchor, and my father's recipe for happiness, however well-intentioned, was powerless to help me.

With a little over a year until high school graduation I was doing my best to make the most of things. I had learned to barely manage, if not submit to, my ever-present despondency. I found a part-time job, bought my first car and made a few friends. I avoided serious drugs—not from any moral rectitude, but because I was unwilling to risk compromising an already fragile mind. Staying out of trouble was a means to avoid additional inner conflict. I was an honors student and dabbled in campus politics. From outward appearances I was a normal teenager, albeit a cynical one. Yet inside I was fighting a war of attrition against an unseen enemy whose power I had not even begun to fully grasp.

## **A CRY FOR HELP**

One late night I was alone in my bedroom and feeling especially despondent. Contemplating the future, a sense of dread crashed over me like a wave of putrefying wreckage. I felt like a little child in genuine fear and utterly alone.

Peering up through my open window into the warm, starless, Southern California night I dropped to my knees and uttered a forlorn, cosmic, appeal:

**“God, if you exist, if you’re out there, help me. Please. Help me.”**

That was it. I didn't expect an answer and didn't get one. Except for the irritating hum of the streetlight outside, there was only silence.