

*With backs to the wall, under the burden of weariness,  
and in the gray light of futility, read Job and Jeremiah,  
and hold on.*

Gottfried Benn

*The man who yearns for light must walk in darkness;  
That which increases we call forth man's gladness.  
True meaning reigns where all sense has departed;  
Where no more ways exist there a new way has started.*

Manfred Hausmann

*Kept sweetly by a host of benign powers  
We simply wait the future, come what may.  
God is with us from morning till night's hours  
And surely will be with us each new day.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

# OUT OF THE DEPTHS

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## 1. *The God of Ends* (*After an Air Raid*)

*And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind  
from his birth.  
And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin,  
this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?  
Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his  
parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest  
in him (John 9:1-3).*

A CHURCH as severely damaged as ours, standing in a waste of ruins, is the right place to read a passage such as this. We cannot, as usual, shut ourselves off for a short time behind the walls of our house of prayer and turn aside from all others to look only upon the Lord. We see mortally stricken houses through the gaping windows of our church. We cannot overlook the fact that horror is with us. The ruins themselves have a voice and a look in this hour. As Jesus says, the very stones cry out. What do they cry through these open windows? Are they making accusation, or are they perhaps raising a question, the dreadful question, "Why?"

There are many among us who have lost everything and who will find it hard to erase from their minds the horror they have suffered and the collapse of their individual world. And even if they do, they cannot blot out the specific question which we see whenever we look into their wounded and tortured eyes, the question, "Why?"

Many of our congregation who were perhaps with us last week are no longer engaging in the earthly worship of

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God which we, wanderers and fugitives, celebrate. The tears have been wiped away from their eyes and they see with enlightened vision the enigmatic paths whose ends we cannot see, much as we should like to do so. When we consider these transfigured members of the congregation — and how can we help having them in our thoughts while questioning and seeking and yearning? — we note that they at least have a voice and a look, and that there is something they wish to say or indicate to us. What is it that the Church Triumphant has to say to the questioning ruins, to the questioning Church, and to the questioning world?

At root that which torments us most does not consist in difficult situations, in physical sorrows, or even in the great catastrophes which overtake our lives. When our soldiers came back in 1918, the national disaster was not the worst thing that awaited them. The worst thing was the question they brought back with them, the question, *Why* has so much blood been shed in vain? *Why* has all this had to come on Germany? They would perhaps have been more settled, and could perhaps have borne their burdens, if someone could have answered this question. Similarly, the men in our text are tormented by the question, How does it come about that the man born blind is stricken by the dreadful fate of everlasting night? What worries them is the question of suffering in the world, and especially of the strange and inexplicable distribution of suffering.

It is undoubtedly very remarkable that Jesus quite simply rejects this question. He did so on other occasions, for example, when He was asked why the tower which collapsed in Siloam fell on certain people and buried them in its ruins (Luke 13:1ff.). *Why* does Jesus not tackle these questions? Does He know nothing of what each of us knows or at least dimly suspects? Does He not accept the connection between guilt and punishment? In all misfortunes and catastrophes our deepest human instinct compels us to ask who the guilty ones are. We do so in this war. So terrible a

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disaster cannot have come by chance on the peoples of the West. It is not the playful whim of fate that millions are plunged into death and ancient cultures are obliterated. We feel that these are judgments. And where there is judgment, there is guilt. In all religions the priests bring sin offerings and the people join in penitential processions in times of war and terror, earthquake and fire. So deep is our sense of the underlying connection! And even when we cannot find a guilty party in some great or small misfortune, we invent one. So profound is our feeling on this point that behind sickness and death, behind bombs, ruined cities, and scattered families there has to be guilt. In face of all the horrors and woes of history and of our own lives, we have to raise the startling and insistent question, *Why*? An obscure feeling forces us to do so. It is the feeling and sense that we are now dealing with judgment and guilt.

We are again passing through one of the periods when we feel that we are very closely linked with the circle around Jesus. Their questions are ours; their hearts' torment is ours. We press close behind them, and we ask, and are all ears when Jesus answers. We are not alone before the Lord with our question — *Why*? To know even this is good and comforting.

What answer does Jesus give to the question concerning guilt, to the great question of our lives, the question of *why*. In the first place, His whole earthly life is an answer. When John sent the message from prison, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" Jesus sent back the reply:

"Go and shew John again those things which ye do see and hear: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them." Its meaning is that as Saviour He lays His gentle, healing hand on all the wounds of this world, both of body and of soul.

The wounds of the soul consist in a bad conscience and in the inner conflict of our hearts which are not right with

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God and which have no peace. To these wounds of the innermost man He says: "Thy sins are forgiven thee." The other wounds of life are those inflicted by destiny and suffering, by sickness and poverty, by the violence of war, by force, and by the sorrow of this world which constantly makes us homeless within it. To this hurt of tormented humanity Jesus says: "Rise, take up thy bed and walk."

Jesus knows and says quite a lot about the dreadful connection between guilt and suffering. He knows and says that they are two sides to the alienation which man has merited by breaking away from the Father. This is a world that has torn itself free from the arms of the Father. It is a cold world, in which one can be terribly alone. It is a world in which one can perish without anyone knowing about it. This world which has torn itself free from the arms of the Father is a world in which there are mute graves and sinister asylums, in which distrust and ambition raise their Gorgon heads and the fiery red horseman of war inflames the nations against one another.

There is a final, accusing guilt behind all these horrors, and the waste of ruins around this church is a sign raised up by God to show how far the destructive sorrow of a godless world has already extended and to give us an inkling of how monstrously it might yet increase.

In a terrifying vision Paul in Romans 8 sees even the mute and unself-conscious creation plunged into great sighing and groaning because it is implicated in the catastrophe which man's separation from God has brought down. Often we think that something of this is perceptible when we look into the eyes of a dog.

I believe that today we are better able to understand and to see, if we are not completely blinded, that all these things are not owing to the blind march of fate, but that judgments are being executed, that great visitations have begun, and that the ruins and rubble, the smoke-filled sky and the new graves are all calling us to repent, to make our peace with

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God, to come back to the open arms of the Father from which we have broken away. For the doors of the Father's house are still open, and its light is still kindled.

But the text then raises a deeper question. For the disciples ask Jesus who has sinned, the man or his parents. They know all the things that we have just said. They have been brought up in the biblical tradition. They realize that there is a close connection between guilt and suffering. But a new question now arises. In this living encounter with a sick and tormented man, this new question is even more urgent and tormenting than the general question concerning guilt and suffering. I mean the question, Why has judgment fallen on *this* man? Why must he particularly suffer so much? Why did the tower of Siloam fall on the eighteen who were buried under it?

We might, of course, put the same question in the first person: Why must I go through my present suffering and face the ruin of my hopes? Did I not build up my home, which the bombs have shattered so dreadfully, with all the love of which I was capable? Did I not sacrifice myself for it? Did I not build into it all my good wishes for my aged parents or my children? Why was I struck? Or again, Why has my son or brother been snatched away? Was not his life full of hopes? What evil did he do? Did he not go forth with pure ideals? Who, then, has sinned, he or his parents? We cannot avoid this question. The great German tragedies (I am thinking not only of the *Nibelungenlied*) also have something to say concerning it.

Do we not all know this troublesome questioner within us who in contempt or despair, in sorrow or accusation constantly asks, "Why?" This little word "why" is no torrent of speech. It is only a little drop of three letters. Yet it can cause mortal injury to our souls.

The attitude of those who question Jesus is not that of inquisitive reporters who with ready pencils ask Him to say a few words on an interesting problem of life. For these men

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stand here in the name of the whole race, of all of us. And it is with burning eyes that they stand before Jesus and ask Him, Why this man? Why me?

Now we have already pointed to the remarkable fact that Jesus does not give any answer. Why is this? we ask again. Is His own soul wounded by this question? Has He nothing to say because He has a sudden vision of the cross on which He Himself will raise the question, Why? Why hast Thou forsaken Me, God?

No, it is not that He has nothing to say. He tells the people: Your question is wrongly put. Neither this man nor his parents sinned. God has a purpose for him. He is blind in order that the works of God should be manifested in him. And Jesus then heals him and visibly calls down the glory of God into this poor, dark life.

We go on to ask why Jesus rejects the question of why, and how we ought to ask, if this question is wrong. For we cannot simply stop asking and seeking. The darker it is around us, and the deeper the depths through which we must pass, the less can we do so.

First of all, then, we ask why Jesus rejects the question. So long as I ask *why* something happens to me, my thoughts are centered on self; and those whose ears are sharpened by the gospel detect also a measure of complaint — I have not deserved it. We constantly pretend that we know how God ought to act. This is reflected in the fact that we call Him "the dear Lord." But often, after years, or decades, we have to confess with shame how foolish and arrogant we were in complaining about the way in which He did act. How often have the dark hours in which we clenched our fists against heaven proved to be simply stations on the wise bypaths of His direction which we would not have missed for anything! Thus, by rejecting the question, Jesus helps to liberate us from constant complaint against God and from the injury which we do ourselves thereby.

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Is this all that Jesus has to say on this pressing problem? Does He not also teach us to ask in a new way? He answers the questioners in our story as follows. The poor man is blind "in order that" the works of God may be revealed in him. He has thus been led into the night of blindness in order that the light of God's saving grace and wonderful direction may rise the more brightly about him. And indeed the miracle of healing in this story sheds a bright light on the whole night of suffering. It is part of the light which shines from the Saviour as He makes His way through the night of earth.

There is thus manifested a tremendous liberation, which Jesus brings to us in our need and in our bitter thoughts. For He teaches us to put our question in a way which is meaningful. He tells us that we should not ask "Why?" but "To what end?" In thus fashioning the question Jesus is a true Pastor. For when we understand the change, we are no longer choked with terror. We can breath again. We can cry and not be weary. We can live by the profound peace in our hearts.

Why is this such a tremendous liberation? When Jesus teaches us to ask to what end, we learn to look away from ourselves to God and to His future plans for our lives. We learn not to be immersed in our own thoughts. We are given a new, positive, and productive direction in our thinking.

Again and again it may be observed that sicknesses of spirit and incurable sorrows display the phenomena of what the physician calls an "egocentric structure." This means that in the darkest hours of this kind of melancholy our thoughts constantly revolve around ourselves: Why has this happened to me? What is to become of me? I see no way of escape. And the more I become immersed in myself, the more wretched I become. This wretchedness can lead to real sickness. All egocentric people are basically unhappy, for they want to be rulers of their own lives but with fatal certainty

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the moment is bound to come when they no longer know how.

But lo! Jesus now comes with stretched-out hand; He lifts up our heads and shows us how fortunate it is that we are not the rulers, but that God is in control, that He directs all things, and that He has a plan for us. So we suddenly look away from ourselves — and what an infinite blessing it is that we are no longer in the center of the picture, with that terrible sense of our own importance! We suddenly see the clouds, the air, the winds about us and realize that the One who directs their path and course will not forget me, that He has in view a goal for my way and wandering. This is the productive aspect of this new manner of questioning. We learn to look away from ourselves and to look to the ends which God has for our lives.

There is a second liberation. We men are dominated by the moment. If the sun shines, we rejoice to high heaven. If the bombs fall, everything seems to be lost. We can no longer see through the nearest cloud of dust. Our heart is defiant or despairing, and either way it is vacillating.

Jesus, however, frees us from the moment by His new question, *To what end?* He causes us to look to the future. God has something for you, and not for you alone, but for the whole world. God is a God of ends. Again and again the New Testament teaches us step by step to look to the end of all things when the confusing paths of our life, on which there are so many ruined hopes and graves of loved ones and neighbors, will reach their goal, and God's great thoughts of peace will be thought out to the end. The Revelation of John shows us how things will look at the ultimate end. Heaven will ring with the songs of praise of those who have overcome. They have all gone through the same tribulation as we have. They have suffered; they have been in distress in which they saw no heaven, no Father's eye; they have called out of the depths and cried, "Father, where art Thou?" But through it all they have sensed that

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this "wrong" way through tears and vales of woe could only end thus in praise of God. Jesus causes us to see and hear this final praise when He teaches us to ask, *To what end?* This question gives me peace. For we cannot be nervous even in a dangerous situation if we know that it is going to end well, that it is all leading to a goal which is marked out for me and which means the very best for me. Christians are men who have a future to which they are conducted by a hand which is infinitely sure. They can lift up their heads because they know that this end is drawing near, however strange may be the way which leads to it, or which seems not to do so.

The third liberation which Jesus gives us through this question is perhaps the greatest. For when He asks to what end, He puts us to work and gives us a productive task. The best healing ointment for despair and depression is that of work, of tasks to perform.

To work through to the question of to what end, means work and discipline, an inner training. To turn aside from the negative question of why, means labor and effort. God is always positive. All that He does has a positive and helpful meaning. We have simply to be ready to go with Him on His way. Those who live in perpetual opposition can never see the purposes of God for them and they are always cutting across them. It is from such opposition that the Lord wills to free us when He teaches us the new form of the question. He thus gives our inward man a very clear working task. He has to fulfill it Himself, and He became our Forerunner in this fulfillment on the cross. Or do we imagine that it was no work for Him to work out and wrestle through the question: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" to the final saying on the cross: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit," and therefore to final accord and peace with what the hands of God held for Him? It means work, a holy, inner discipline, not to look back to

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what God has taken from us but to look forward to the tasks which He is giving us.

I think of those wounded by bombs, of the bereaved and sorrowing, and I solemnly say to them, on the commission of Jesus and on the basis of our text, that with all their sorrow they are given a task.

Perhaps you are given the task to live for others more than you ever did when life was secure. Could you have really understood their needs if you had not yourself been plunged into these depths? Wounds must heal wounds. True helpers of their fellow men have always been those who were greatly hurt, who had to suffer great sorrows. Jesus could be our Pastor, our great High Priest, as the book of Hebrews calls Him, only because He Himself had to stand against the forces of guilt and suffering and death and thus He could have sympathy with those who sit in the shadow of these powers.

I ask, in the name of our text, Are you ready to go out and to seek the man who needs you, to find the task which God is giving you? I can only repeat with sacred monotony, God is always positive. He has something in view when He does something. He does it for a purpose. Do you see the field before you? It is a field; not the yawning waste of an uncertain future, as you supposed in your defiant despair. Put your hand to the plough, then, and do not look back.

It is very remarkable that Jesus calls the poor, that is, those who have lost everything, the lonely, the hungry, the thirsty, "blessed." Why does He do so? It is because He has something for them. Perhaps the ground has to give way under all of us, as under them, in order that we may ask where is the true ground on which we can build our lives. The very hour when all human security is shattered, when we are in the streets without either work or calling, when men turn from us, when our houses fall about us in ruins, when all is cold because our dearest friends are dead, when we are no longer able to see our way — this hour can be the most

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blessed in our lives. For then God wills to be all things to us — home and friend, mother hand and food for the coming day, the place where we can lay our heads, the heart in which we can find rest and can be like the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field and say, "I have nothing, and now Thy hand must be all things to me."

Almost all fathers of our faith had to go through such testing fires. They had to live out as their own, in persecutions and afflictions, the destiny of the Master. They were often poorer than the foxes with their holes and the birds of the air with their nests. They were often hungrier than the lowliest beast. But when God did give them holes and nests and food, then they possessed these things as new men; they enjoyed them in a different way. They then learned to praise the dark hours when the coming day lay yet before them in dreadful obscurity and they did not yet know that only a thin partition separated them from the greatest surprises of God, so that instead of the coming day with its anxiety, eternity was granted to them.

It is to all these wonders which God has prepared that we should look, to surprises on the next stretch of the way, to tasks which He sets before us, to the many kindnesses which He will have waiting for us from the handclasp of a stranger to the laughter of a child. It is to these things that we should look, for these are the things God has in store for us and it is for this reason that Jesus teaches us to ask, "To what end? God is a God of gifts and tasks."

Finally, we thus see that everything changes under our hands if with our hand in the hand of our Lord we are ready to march forward to the great ends of God. Our conscience is stained and we are guilty. But being in the hand of Jesus, we may ask with fear and trembling, "To what end?" and we may receive the answer of Paul: In order that grace may be mightier, the cross greater, and the Lord dearer to us.

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Jesus, then, is the Redeemer of our heart and the One who transforms all things. He teaches us to look to the great ends of God because He Himself stands at this end. He is the One who will come again when the time is ripe. Everything is directed to this consummation of His work. There is sowing in tears during these years of terror, but the seed sown by God in good and pious hearts will ripen in the day of harvest. The hopeless confusion of nations and the destruction of proud traditions are the terrible signs of man who, alienated from God, is at the end of his own resources and is now asked whether he will let himself be summoned to a new beginning. The afflictions of your life and mine are the hollow ground under our feet which gives way because God wills to catch us.

All around us are ends and promises. The air is full of the divine question whether we are ready to come to Him and to accept the tasks He gives us. This is what Jesus means when He says that the darkness in the poor life of the man born blind, the darkness in your life and mine, is only to the end that the glory of God should be manifested thereby. This glory will come and it will be manifested in a most surprising way. It will come and be manifested in such a way as to astonish us, for God has a future for us, and He has not yet completed His plans.

Therefore, "Lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh."

## *2. On Death*

*(Letter to a Soldier during the War)*

YOU REMIND ME of the many prophecies before the war that if the apocalyptic horseman of war should again sweep over our country there would necessarily come a storm of inward awakening. From every possible illusion, idolatry, and web of empty words we would awaken again to the final true realities of death and God.

But now, while slowly convalescing after your hospitalization, you write that for most fellow soldiers this apparently plausible expectation has not been realized. Even truly apocalyptic encounters with death — with death in its most horrible forms and with a sadistic manifestation of human nature — have not proved to be, as expected, either a preaching of the Law or a visitation. Indeed, for the most part it seems that they have simply increased man's hardness. When we think that God's alarm clock must now surely stab every ear to attention, then the almost overpowering force of events seems to do the very opposite. Consciously or unconsciously, most people see in all this simply the revelation of naked struggle for power in which we must armor our souls with the proverbial "thick skin." "The play of forces and our related personal destinies are all in the hands of fate." That is usually the final conclusion.

Why is this so? You write concerning our fathers who fought in the first world war: "Even though their Christianity might have been dead, or conventional, or perverted by