



INTRODUCTION

Anna Hartman walked into our church every Sunday with her husband and two small boys, passing out kisses and hugs like Christmas candy. It didn't matter if she knew you or not. If you were in her path, you got one or the other. Or both. And there was nothing fake about it. Anna was the genuine article: a committed, joy-filled, low-maintenance Christian.

One day her doctor told her she needed a tonsillectomy. He assured her it was nothing to worry about—just a couple of little snips. She'd be in the hospital overnight and then go home and eat ice cream for a day or two. Her plan was to lay in a supply of Ben & Jerry's and enjoy the time off work.

But on the morning after the surgery, Anna was running a slight fever. The doctor seemed puzzled, but not alarmed. "It happens sometimes," he said. "Just plan to stay one more night, and we'll try to have you out of here by noon tomorrow." Anna was disappointed but figured one more night in the hospital wouldn't be the end of the world.

She was wrong.

Late that night, as she lay alone in her room, an artery ruptured in her throat and produced an outpouring of blood so excessive that it choked and drowned her in a matter of minutes. The remote-control device that she could have used to call for help was found dangling

from her bed. No doubt she'd been groping frantically for it during her last seconds of life.

When the nurse found her, Anna had been dead for some time. Her gown and bed linens were soaked in blood. Pools were congealing on the floor. Streaks and splatters were head-high on the walls and privacy curtain. The room looked like a scene from a bad horror film.

The doctor who performed the surgery was called and arrived in no time. I was sitting in the waiting room with Anna's husband, Ron, when he came in to express his sympathy. "It was an act of God," he explained. "One of those freaky things that no one could have predicted."

But it wasn't that simple.

An autopsy revealed that an artery had been nicked during the tonsillectomy. The pathologist called it a ticking bomb just waiting to explode. And explode it did.

I sat with Ron while Anna's body was removed, and then we walked out to our cars. I'll never forget the conversation we had there in the light of a street lamp at about 1:00 a.m.

"Mark, why did God let this happen?"

"I don't know, Ron."

"We prayed for her."

"I know."

"All of us. Me, you, and the boys. We stood in a circle and held hands and asked God to protect her."

"I know."

"So why didn't He?"

"I honestly don't know, Ron. I wish I did."

"It all seems like some kind of cruel joke. I mean, she was only twenty-eight!"

"I know."

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Ron fell silent for a moment and stared off into space. I knew that images of his beloved Anna had to be flashing through his mind.

Their first date.

Their wedding day.

The births of their children.

The last time they made love.

Even in the dim light, I could see that Ron's cheeks were wet with tears. He stared off into the starry night and then turned to me and said in a trembling voice, "This is my worst nightmare. I have no idea how I'm going to get through this."

I could have put my hand on his shoulder and said, "Just trust the Lord, Ron. He'll take care of you." But I knew he would counter with the observation that the Lord hadn't done a very good job of taking care of Anna. And quite honestly, that was an issue I didn't feel up to addressing.

So I said nothing.

That night, through no fault of his own, Ron Hartman suddenly found himself on a very hard road, one that he never wanted to travel. Sadly, the road proved a little too steep and treacherous. In an apparent attempt to find some relief from the loneliness and painful memories, he remarried quickly and moved far away. That was several years ago. The last I heard, he was struggling mightily.

I wish I could say that Ron's case is rare and isolated, but it isn't. Every day, people from all walks of life suddenly find themselves on roads they never wanted to travel:

"It's malignant."

"I've found someone else."

"I don't love you anymore."

"Your son has been arrested."

"Mom, I think I'm pregnant."

"You may never walk again."

“Your wife didn’t survive the surgery.”

“There’s been a shooting at your son’s school.”

These are just a few of the statements that can jerk you off the smooth, flat pavement of your well-ordered life and send you careening down a blind alley or, worse yet, to the crumbling edge of a dangerous mountain cliff. The noxious mixture of shock, anger, and grief, along with the unanswerable questions these statements produce, can set your head spinning. Like my friend Ron, you can suddenly find yourself spiritually disoriented and making harmful choices that will haunt you forever. Or, like countless other people, you can simply give up hope and join the ranks of the living dead.

As a pastor, I know all too well that the hard roads of life are littered with the souls of good people who found them too hard to negotiate. Even now, as I’m writing these words, faces are flashing through my mind. The faces of people I’ve loved and laughed with and worshipped with. Good people who touched my life in special ways but never will again because they died or got lost on roads they would never have chosen in a million years.

Are you on a hard road right now? Have you recently had your world rocked by one of the bombshell statements listed above? Are you reeling from the shock? Boiling with anger? So heartbroken and confused that you don’t know what to do? If so, I’m glad God saw fit to bring you and this book together. What you have in your hands is a road map of sorts, a traveler’s guide for the hard roads of life.

I found this road map tucked away in my Bible. No, it wasn’t a dog-eared piece of paper with directional signs and navigational symbols. It was a Bible story. The story of a group of people who once traveled the hardest road of all. Yes, I’m referring to the story of the Israelites, *God’s* people, and their forty-year trek through the wilderness. It was an arduous journey through a dark and dangerous land. There were setbacks, detours, and losses along the way. Heavy

losses, as we will see. But the story has a happy ending. With God's help, they found their way safely back to the land flowing with milk and honey.

What I've discovered is that their story contains timeless lessons that apply with uncanny relevance to the hard-road journeys that modern believers are called upon to make. I've turned these into thirteen strategies. They're so simple that even a child can understand them, yet they're so powerful that any one of them could save your life. Taken as a group, they are a map you can follow. They are a light for your path. They are a reason for hope.

Earlier, I mentioned my silence in response to Ron Hartman's agony on that terrible night when his wife died so unexpectedly. At the time, I felt that my inability to say something profound was an indictment of sorts. I remember feeling ashamed as I drove home in the wee hours of the morning. I now realize that I was making a simple but common mistake. I was looking for a way to explain *why* such terrible things were happening to him, when I should have simply offered a few ideas on *how* he could face the future. You see, the *whys* of life are often out of our reach. I'm convinced that only eternity will unlock all of their mysteries. But the *hows* are a different story. The Bible is chock-full of *hows*.

For the most part, this is a book of *hows*, not *whys*. I'll leave the philosophers to argue the whys of life. My goal is simply to share the wonderful news I've discovered—that even the hardest roads lead home.

Come. Let me show you.