

“Dr. Robert Wise is a personal friend and colleague whom I have gone to many times throughout my life for answers to the tough questions we all face in life. I am a psychiatrist and hear these questions very frequently. . . . In *When There Is No Miracle: Finding Hope in Pain and Suffering*, Wise tackles one of the toughest questions that we all struggle with. He gives excellent insights for dealing with suffering, pain, and even death in a way that will enable readers to recover more quickly from these difficult times as well as build a foundation that prepares us for whatever the future may hold. I recommend this book highly.”

—Paul Meier, MD, author, psychiatrist, and founder of the national chain of nonprofit Meier Clinics, www.meierclinics.org

“Robert Wise, in his exceptional book *When There Is No Miracle: Finding Hope in Pain and Suffering*, invites us to join with him as he receives and dispenses the godly wisdom obtained through years of counseling the victims of grief. And, as he so eloquently puts it, ‘sooner or later, tragedy will march into your own living room.’ It has taken Archbishop Wise thirty years, as a social worker and then a pastor, to write and then rewrite this extraordinarily helpful, positive, and inspirational book. *When There Is No Miracle* catalogs a lifetime of stories of grief and tragedy in those around him and in his own incredible life, peppered with his numerous personal, intimate conversations with Jesus. The book positively guides you through the exasperation and disappointment of a prayer not answered or the miracle not received. With transparency and compassion, Wise delivers numerous illustrations of God’s incredible timing along with His grace, His mercy, and the unbelievable healing power of His love.”

—S. Bryan Hickox, Emmy-winning television producer

“During the past three or four years, I have participated in many healing services, read many books on the subject, and yet ‘there was no miracle.’ The thorough way in which Robert Wise has anticipated the questions facing a person with no miracle has touched me deeply. In every chapter there is fresh strength to see God’s long-range viewpoint instead of my short-sighted one.”

—Rosalind Rinker, author of *Prayer: Conversing with God*

“The title of this book should be the footprint for a well-lived life. As faithful as you can be, as steadfast as you go through life, as hopeful as you remain, the hardest thing to live through is being left behind. This book should be recommended reading for understanding that an unanswered prayer doesn’t mean that God doesn’t love you.”

—Sharon Sala, *New York Times* best-selling author

Revised and Expanded Edition

when there is no miracle
finding hope in pain and suffering

Robert L. Wise

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For those who have shaped the inescapable questions for me:

Little Ann of Amsterdam

The victims of Dachau and Auschwitz

Gene and Eloise May

The dearest friends and parishioners who died unexpectedly

The finest people who died in far-off wars

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PREFACE

NEARLY FORTY YEARS ago I wrote the first edition of this book. At the time I was struggling to understand the pain, suffering, and grief that I found around me. A dear friend had died of a brain tumor, and I wanted to know why. In the four decades that have passed, I have lived in a world filled with war, mayhem, and killing. The question has not disappeared: Why do the innocent suffer?

Before we even approach that question, we should recognize the struggle that all who have experienced severe loss already know too well. When a loss is personal, our entire being is enmeshed in pain. For a period of time, we seem to be unable to experience much more than the trauma. We find it difficult to go to sleep at night and may only sleep for a few hours. In the morning, we wake up thinking that maybe it has all been a bad dream. After a few minutes, we know our loss is no illusion. And another day of struggle has begun.

With time, the pain often gives way to anger. We may not even be sure who we are angry with—a friend, the church, possibly even ourselves—but usually it ends up with God. After all, isn't the Creator the one who stands behind what has happened? We might conclude that God is responsible and want to rail at Him. Since we're not sure what being angry with God might unleash, we may keep our anger somewhat under cover. On the other hand, we may swear that we will never pray again and vow to cut the Almighty out of our lives entirely. Some people do.

But eventually the day comes when we start to search for an answer to why this disaster happened. We want to discover a reason for such trauma and whether there are any insights, principles, or explanations that can make sense of our loss. If we are intellectually honest, we may push the envelope with a pastor or priest. What could the pros tell us?

That's why this book was written. The quest for understanding created these pages. I wanted to know why. I needed an answer to the big questions. I hope my struggle for understanding can be of help to you in yours.

The Most Reverend Robert L. Wise
June 25, 2016

when there is no miracle

finding hope in pain and suffering

A PERSONAL CONVERSATION WITH JESUS

My mind was so filled with wonder that I thought His teaching itself was intoxicating. To listen to His words was to soar to high cliffs of insight that left the whole world far below.

“Oh, Jesus, what mysteries you unravel,” I said. “I want to understand everything. Tell me all of the secrets of the Father’s will.”

Always He was kind, but His voice was firm. “No, you have not been given to know the breadth of every plan. The riddles of the unseen are crucial to your journey.”

“But Master, the road bends and I’m not sure of the direction. There are forks in the path and no marker to point the better way. I am left with so much uncertainty.”

Jesus bent down and picked up a handful of pebbles from the dusty trail. He bounced them in His palm and then flung them over the terrain. “Do they seem to fly in a pointless flight? And yet they all do come home again to their mother, the earth. Doesn’t My Father esteem you infinitely more?”

“Oh, of course, Master. Always.”

“Then enjoy the mystery of the road. All that counts is that at the end of the journey you will find Him there.”

[ONE]

Where Do We Begin?

SEMINARY WAS JUST finished and I had come to my first church. Good people, a nice facility, and high anticipation for the future—a good start for right out of the gate. It seemed more than I could have expected. Then I discovered that I was following a nice guy who had gotten into trouble over the issue of prayer in public schools. An uproar had shaken the entire community. The congregation was in shambles, and the church finances were on the edge of bankruptcy. On my first Sunday, only twenty-five members showed up.

Didn't matter. I was ready to take on bears and lions. I felt I could tackle any problem. So I began vigorously calling on the membership and set out to create a new environment in the congregation. I knew I could count on the church's lay leader. Everyone liked Gene May.

Gene was a handsome, no-nonsense guy who walked with a cane even though he was only in his forties. I soon discovered the cane was necessary because he was partially blind as a result of an operation to remove a brain tumor. The slight indentation on the side of his head was a result of the procedure. Gene didn't talk much about the cancer, but I assumed it was taken care of, and we went on about our business.

I began to notice that the indentation on his temple seemed to be filling. I wasn't sure what it meant but I knew that this was not a good sign. Finally, his wife, Eloise, confided that Gene's remaining eyesight was failing. Another operation was not possible. The tumor had returned.

The Mays had two sons, and I knew the boys were struggling with what they could see happening. We talked, prayed, and kept hoping. The tumor kept growing.

Finally Gene made his last trip to the hospital. They called me to come quickly and offer the final prayers. As Gene slipped away in the darkness of that dim room, I knew I couldn't weep because I had to be supportive of the family, but the spiritual air was knocked out of me. My dear friend had died while only a young man, and I couldn't make any sense out of his death.

That's where this book began.

Staring into the Emptiness

A skeptical medical doctor recently observed that the church loves to talk about the times when prayers are answered, but they are silent about the times when nothing happens. While his remark does not negate the fact that multitudes are healed through prayer, his charge exposes our tendency to ignore the many occasions when nothing seems to have happened. These times of awful silence leave us bewildered and we'd rather walk away than talk about the emptiness.

But his comment also points to a problem in the Protestant church. With multitudes of plain crosses adorning church buildings and sanctuaries, virtually no one has a crucifix anywhere in sight. That kind of cross is for the Roman Catholics, we explain. We celebrate the resurrection, the empty cross, Easter. Well, that's a point in our favor, but it hides the fact that we don't like to visit the crucifixion. Our inability to grasp the full picture of the cross is part of the reason we have so much trouble handling the times when nothing keeps pain and death away from our door.

A prominent pastor and friend built a large, successful church. When I was visiting the congregation, I noticed there was not even one cross—adorned or not—in the entire multiacre plant. I inquired why there were no crosses. I was told the pastor considered the cross to be too negative. Everything had to be positive!

This pastor may have developed a congregation of up-and-onwarders, but there was no place there for the down-and-outers. The people who struggle with brokenness cannot live on clichés and enthusiasm. Much more is needed. Like a crucifix.

[In the pain and agony of the crucifixion, there are sacred secrets and divine discoveries to be made, which enable us to live through our own times of trial and trauma.]

The Roman Catholic Church has for centuries lived and worked with “the least of these.” A host of saints have walked with the poor and destitute when nothing miraculous changed their situation. They have learned that in the pain and agony of the crucifixion, there are sacred secrets and divine discoveries to be made, which enable us to live through our own times of trial and trauma. We must draw near to discover what we may have missed.

We might find that the emptiness is not as empty as we thought.

Finding the Other Side

I know a great deal more about pain than I could have thought possible when I penned the first edition of this book. I have buried my grandparents, parents, and nephews. I have watched divorce ravage my family and seen some of my most cherished dreams shredded. I have had to walk through nights darker than I ever dreamed were possible. But I did get to the other side. Today, I no longer worry about other black nights that I am sure I have yet to visit. I can tell you with a greater certainty than at any time in my past that “underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deut. 33:27), and they do hold in the middle of the night. The God of which I write is still the Rock that does not move. Regardless of appearances, nothing can separate us from His love. We must examine honestly both the times when His love is real and when that same love is hidden. In the next few chapters we will attempt to do so.

It is surprising to realize how unexpected our discoveries can be. Here's an example. During my early days in a hostile seminary environment, I faced PhDs ready to slice up my young faith like a slab of bacon and serve me at the next faculty cookout. So I corresponded with Dr. Bernard Ramm, seeking insight and help with the Scriptures under critical scrutiny. Dr. Ramm was internationally known for his work in hermeneutics, the science of biblical interpretation. I searched to find his address and wrote the scholar, seeking his help. I told him I was going to be in a hostile environment and needed his insights. Much to my delight, he wrote back, and a relationship began.

Although we never formally met, Dr. Ramm kept his letters coming and sent books to help me grasp and argue for the veracity and dependability of the Bible. I often reflected that, without his instruction from afar, I might well have washed out and left the rough-and-tumble academic world an agnostic, or at least crippled and inept. His inspiration and instruction in defending and interpreting Scripture helped me frame my initial approach to ministry. Professors who held divergent viewpoints had to yield to the firm defenses that I made via Bernard Ramm.

I graduated from seminary, began a ministry, and lost contact with Dr. Ramm. The ministry prospered, and eventually I wrote *When There Is No Miracle*. Over a decade later, a letter came from Modesto, California, with the return address marked B. Ramm. I eagerly opened the envelope, wondering if this could be the same theologian. But why would he be writing me, a parish pastor? The letter was poorly scribbled, as if by someone with faltering penmanship. The longer I read, the more amazed I became. The thank-you note was indeed from my old friend and counselor, now at the end of his tether.

Six weeks earlier, Dr. Ramm had gone in for a routine and simple cataract operation. Everything had gone wrong. A week later he was permanently blind in one eye and rapidly losing all sight in the other. The ensuing weeks were painful and catastrophic. He was terrified! A theologian works with his eyes like a pianist performs with his fingers. Dr. Ramm was devastated.

But his wife had bought him a copy of my book. Together they plowed through the pages. Something was stirred in Bernard Ramm. While he had not had a miracle, his spiritual sight began to return, even though physically he continued with cloudy vision.

Barely able to see well enough to compose a letter, he wrote to tell me that doubt had moved into the bed next to him. For all of his theological expertise and personal brilliance, he had fallen into despair and depression. A voracious reader, he felt his mind was starving and his soul bereft of comfort. Eventually limited sight returned to his remaining good eye. A copy of my book had brought comfort. *When There Is No Miracle* was his first reading in weeks, and something very important happened as he laboriously worked his way through the chapters. Depression waned and faith returned.

Bernard Ramm had forgotten the name of the little seminarian with whom he corresponded years earlier. My name had merged into the multitude of students marching through his classrooms and out into the ministry. Although he didn't remember me, he wrote to say thank you for the help the book had given him.

I wrote back, "Thank you, old friend. You don't remember me, but without your concern and help years ago, I would never have written those pages and been available for you in your time of need." Bernard Ramm had found the other side. His spiritual eyes had prevailed.

Recovering Our Faith

The writer of Hebrews wrote, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). Our task is to find a set of eyes that can pierce the invisible and see what has existed when the emptiness appeared to be all encompassing. We will attempt to discover how not to have our hopes dashed. Far from developing a blind faith that ignores the issues, the doubts, and the difficulties, we will quest after a faith that walks through the most obscure night—not fearlessly but with enduring confidence.

The following chapters are not a theologian's dissertation but the

product of a pastor's daily rounds of hospitals, homes, and haunts of affliction. From my journeys I have learned that it is best to gain a correct perspective *before* we come to a crisis. Once we descend into the swirl of emotion and confusion, the dilemmas loom so large that we find it difficult to see beyond the question marks. I hope these insights will more adequately prepare you to recognize God's presence when turmoil raises a dust that will not allow you to open your eyes, and that they will also answer the issues of hurting people.

A PERSONAL CONVERSATION WITH JESUS

When I first encountered Jesus, His sense of destiny drew me even closer. Never had I seen anyone who showed such certainty and surety with His every action. This was a man who knew where He was going! The longer I listened, the more that verdict was confirmed.

One night at supper I asked Him about my own unanswered question. "Jesus, You have made sense out of my aimless life. Yet so much of what I have experienced seems to have no purpose whatsoever. Why can't I understand the final reasons for all that I have suffered?"

He picked up the loaf from the table and ripped the bread apart. Holding the torn halves, He stared into my eyes. "My Father does not let us see life from beginning to end. But we know that His loving hands hold even the pieces that are broken."

My doubts insisted on one more word. "But how do I know that His love holds the broken portions?"

He laid down the loaves and reached for my hand. His touch was warm and firm. His answer was simple. "You know me, don't you?"