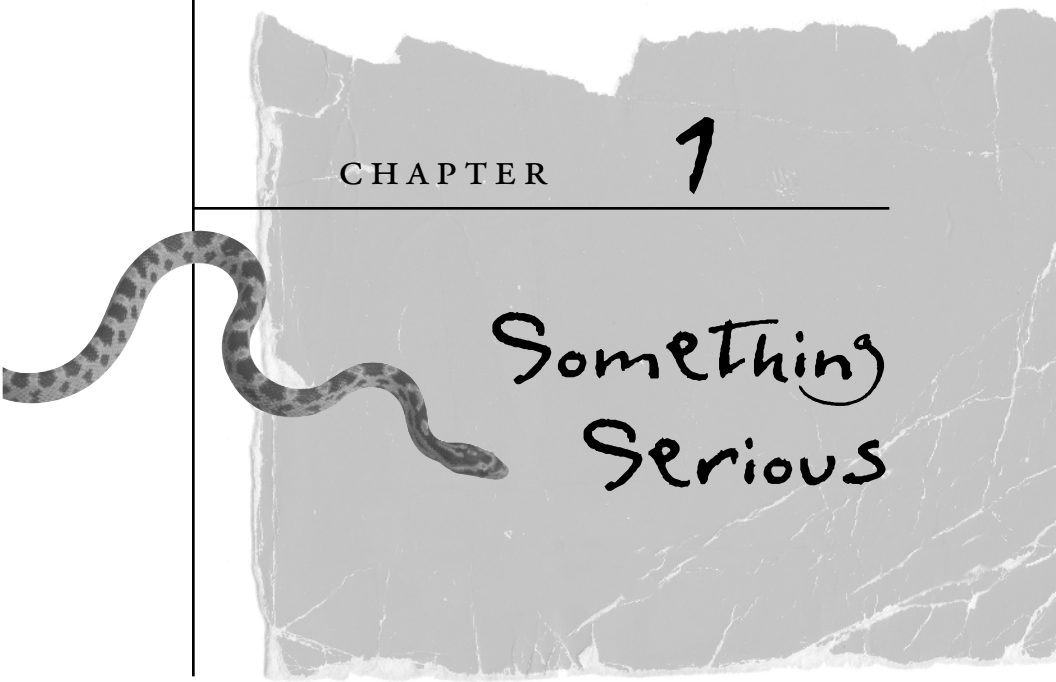
BOOK 1

The Last Word



CHAPTER 1

Something Serious

From centre unto rim, from rim to centre,
In a round vase the water moves itself,
As from without 'tis struck or from within.

—PARADISO, XIV.1–3

ONE COLD AND SNOWY NIGHT in January 2003, I wrote these words in my journal:

> I am midway in my journey through life and I seem to have lost my way. I find myself in a dark place walking, walking, not sure if dawn will ever come. As on a winter night, when black ice forms on every sidewalk and stairway, I can find no firm footing anywhere, and every moment when I am not splayed out on the ice, I am afraid that I am about to slip. A Christian, not to mention a Christian pastor, should not hate. Nor should he feel despair. But here I am, in my

> early forties, and I find myself filled with hatred as a closed basement closet is filled with darkness, and my limbs are heavy with despair. Every step is hard. To lift my hand to my face is laborious. Even standing makes me feel how strong gravity is. I hate this.

As I read those words now, they sound melodramatic, but that's how despair is: grave, cosmic, weighty, epic. This is the story of how I came into that heavy darkness and sought to emerge from it. Whether or not I have fully emerged even now, you will be the judge.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when this whole episode began. I guess I could go way back to 1999, when I stood for several months on a different ledge of despair and considered jumping out of the ministry. With the help of my wife, Carol, and a good friend named Neil Edward Oliver, I pulled back from the ledge in 1999 and began to feel a renewed sense of call in ministry, but just as my enthusiasm returned, hard times also returned in late September 2002. A faction on my church council had raised questions about my doctrinal orthodoxy, so I had been placed on administrative leave until they could conduct a hearing and determine a plan of action. For me, that meant no preaching, no pastoral duties—it was like a paid vacation, really, except that I awoke every morning with a vague feeling of static anxiety; the first words that formed in my mind as I emerged from sleep were "Oh, no."

My closest friend on the council, and the only one who stayed in frequent contact with me, was Ky Lang. He had confidentiality commitments to observe, so he couldn't say much about the council's plans and progress, but he did tell me not to expect anything definitive until after the new year. "You've got a few months of paid leave, Dan. Try to enjoy it." I did try—by spending as much time as I could reading, going out

for coffee nearly every morning with Carol, taking long midday walks, kicking a soccer ball with my two sons, Corey and Trent, and reading some more. But it wasn't easy to enjoy my freedom, knowing what was at stake in my life. "Oh, no" kept echoing in my thoughts.

I prayed a lot during this time, especially on my walks. As beautiful October gave way to a mild November and an unusually cold December here in the Washington, D.C., area, a strange kind of peace at first coexisted with the anxiety and then gradually overshadowed it, much of the time at least. The Christmas season came and went—my first Christmas in many years without sermons to prepare.

Ky was faithful to his confidentiality commitments. He said little, beyond the fact that the council was having meetings—"death by meetings," he called it, and he gave me signals that the council was divided on what to do about me—though I never knew whether the division was four to four or seven to one.

Through these many weeks, I had surprisingly little contact from church members. They had been encouraged by the council to respect my privacy and the council's process by not interfering with my administrative leave. I'm sure people were curious, but through September and October there were only a few phone calls, some suspicious, with a "What are they doing to you?" kind of tone. Others, perhaps assuming the worst—which would mean that my problems were actually of a sexual rather than doctrinal nature—would call and tell us they were praying for us, assuring us they were available if we needed anything. By December, you would have thought we had moved to a new state where we didn't know anyone except Ky and his wife, Leticia, who called and visited often. After years in the spotlight, so to speak, it was actually a relief to have some privacy.

My sense of equilibrium was shaken on a snowy Saturday afternoon in late January 2003.

My daughter, Jess, a second-semester freshman at College Park, Maryland, had come home from college for the weekend. She said she wanted to do her laundry and enjoy some of Carol's home cooking. College food, she said, was boring and was making her fat. But on Saturday afternoon, she made it clear that she had another reason for the early-semester visit. She sat down at the dining room table where I was working on a puzzle, a favorite hobby of mine since childhood and a hobby to which I had turned on Saturdays since I didn't have a sermon waiting to be touched up. "What's up, Jess?" I asked, not looking up from my welter of pieces.

"Can we talk for a minute, Dad?" she asked. "It's something serious."

At "serious," my head snapped up; I felt a rush of internal alarm and my thoughts raced from pregnancy to drugs to depression to bad grades. I nodded, feigning calm. You would think I might feel relieved when she said, "It's about God, Dad, and my ability to keep believing in him, or her, or whatever. It's my faith—I think I'm losing it." The internal panic that flushed through my soul at that moment was no less strong than it would have been if she had said, "I'm pregnant," or "It's cocaine," or "I can't stop thinking about driving off a bridge," or whatever.

I swallowed, nodded again: "OK. Tell me more," those four words being the best summary of what I've learned about both parenting and pastoral counseling through the years.

"Here's the problem," she said. "If Christianity is true, then all the people I love except for a few will burn in hell forever. But if Christianity is not true, then life doesn't seem to have much meaning or hope. I wish I could find a better option. How do you deal with this?"

My daughter's question stabbed me more painfully than I can adequately explain. She had found the Achilles' heel, so to speak, of my own theology, and with that one simple question, I felt something snap in me. No, it didn't snap: it softened, like a floor joist weakened by termites or dry rot. It sagged and crumbled and broke in stages over the days and weeks to come.

I had generally avoided the subject of hell in my preaching over the years, touching on it only when necessary and even then doing so as gently as possible. Whenever anyone asked me about hell, I'd give my best, most orthodox answer, but I'd secretly think, "I'll bet they won't buy it." If they did, I was surprised, because if I were on their side of the table, investigating orthodoxy from the outside instead of defending it from within, my answers would not have sufficed.

Anyway, as parents learn to do—and pastors too—I hid my panic and smiled with a kind of reassuring parental smile.

I tried to help Jess that Saturday afternoon by telling her about "inclusivism," an alternative to the "exclusivist" view she was unhappy with. While exclusivism limited eternal life in heaven to bona fide, confessing Christians, inclusivism kept the door open that others could be saved through Christ even if they never identified as Christians. That seemed to help. After maybe twenty minutes of conversation, the buzzer on the dryer sounded, and she thanked me and went off to pack her warm, dry clothes in her duffel bag while I sat there pretending to keep working on my puzzle. I had a feeling she'd be back with more questions before long.

She was—later that night. "Can I ask you another theological question?" she asked, plopping down on the couch next to me. I hit the mute button on the TV remote, and she said that she still wasn't satisfied with inclusivism. It might get a few more people into heaven than exclusivism, but how did I deal with the fact that even one person could be tortured for an infinity of

time for a finite number of sins? I again put on my parental face, and this time I told her how a finite being's offense against an infinite God is an infinite offense, which she didn't buy and I didn't push because I myself couldn't imagine a biblical writer using that kind of argument. Then I told her about "conditionalism," the idea that hell is temporary and leads to extinction rather than eternal torment, another minority opinion in Christian theology regarding hell, which helped her a bit more, but only until the next morning.

When I came downstairs for breakfast at about 7 A.M., she was brewing some coffee and picked up the conversation as if neither of us had ever left it.

"So Dad," she said, pouring a cup for each of us, "I still couldn't sleep with your answer. It kept churning in my mind all night. I keep asking myself, what's the point of God even making the world if so much goes to waste? And do you think God planned to have some people tortured forever from the very beginning? Or was hell a kind of unexpected plan B that God couldn't anticipate and is now stuck with? Neither of those sounds very good, you know?"

This time, I had nothing to offer. Exclusivism was my starting point, inclusivism was my fall-back, and conditionalism was my last resort. She continued, "So since I couldn't sleep, I went on the Internet last night—well, really it was early this morning—and I was reading about universalism. It sounded pretty cool. What do you think about that?"

In my theological circles, universalism is one small step removed from atheism. It is probably more feared than committing adultery, and to be labeled universalist ends one's career. Decisively. So I again had to hide my shock that my little girl was not only asking questions: now she was flirting with a dangerous heresy. But I didn't know what to say, so I made a joke about not answering theological questions before 9 A.M.

on Sundays, and she let me off the hook. She seemed cheerful enough when her boyfriend, Kincaid, picked her up that afternoon to drive her back to campus. Maybe just considering the option of universalism had a calming effect on her, but it had the opposite effect on her dad.

I had been taught exclusivism since childhood: everyone was excluded from heaven after death unless they were included among the personally, individually, consciously "born again" or "saved." In college, through the writings of C. S. Lewis, I encountered a kinder, gentler modification of exclusivism that acknowledges that it is possible to be saved by Christ without ever having "prayed to receive Christ." Somewhere in *Mere Christianity,* Lewis had written a few simple lines that comforted many of my friends, even though they made me a little nervous:

> The world does not consist of 100 per cent Christians and 100 per cent non-Christians. There are people who are slowly ceasing to be Christians but who still call themselves by that name. . . . There are other people who are slowly becoming Christians though they do not yet call themselves so. There are people who do not accept the full Christian doctrine about Christ but who are so strongly attracted by him that they are his in a much deeper sense than they themselves understand. There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it.

His words "led by God's secret influence" always reminded me of Paul's words in Romans 8—"Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God"—and that always kept the inclusivist back door secretly open for me, even though most of

my colleagues and nearly all of my parishioners considered me an orthodox exclusivist.

Also growing in popularity was conditionalism, or conditional immortality—exclusivism or inclusivism minus the idea of "eternal conscious torment" (abbreviated ECT by its critics), which meant that the unredeemed would be punished for their wrongs and then would cease to exist or that only the redeemed would be resurrected from the unconscious sleep of death. I guess you could say that I was, in reputation, at least, an exclusivist who had secret inclusivist leanings and who could tolerate conditionalists. But universalism was another story. It went further than I was willing to go. It asserted that everyone would ultimately be reconciled to God through Christ, so hell would ultimately be empty, which is tantamount to saying it wouldn't exist, at least not for humans. There were many variations on how and when and so on, but the happy ending, it seemed to me, was too good to be true. Or was it too good *not* to be true? When such questions came to mind, I'd wave them away as quickly as I could, like a cloud of bees.

"Well," I thought, trying to console myself as Jess and Kincaid backed out of the driveway later that day, "if Jess becomes a universalist, at least she'll still be a Christian. That's better than her giving up her whole faith." But then I thought, "But she won't be able to be a member of Potomac Community Church." Our church's doctrinal statement, which I couldn't remember verbatim, may have allowed wiggle room for a mild case of inclusivism, but universalism? No way. The idea that my daughter could be a Christian but not be welcome in my own church stuck like a thorn in my thoughts. I couldn't shake the unacceptability of that. Of course, then it dawned on me that my own status there was far from secure. I'm not sure if that realization made me feel better or worse.

I leaned against the door frame, watching through the storm door as Kincaid's faded red Honda putted up the hill and passed over the crest and out of sight, leaving a bit of blue smoke in its wake. For several minutes, I just stared at the road at the summit of the hill, watched the blue smoke rise, fade, and disappear, and noticed as a few snowflakes began to fall from the blank gray sky. I felt a pang in my soul, something painful and dangerous, hard to define, but something I couldn't ignore. The pang formed into words: "If Jess isn't welcome at PCC, I don't want to be welcome either."

From those moments on, the subject of hell snowballed (pardon the pun) into something close to an obsession. Alien questions kept landing in my mind, abducting my attention. Should the purpose of Christianity be reduced to this: to increase the population of heaven and decrease the crowdedness of hell? Was the message of Jesus and the apostles, at the root, information on how to get your personal soul into heaven after you die? Is that what it all boiled down to? Were billions really going to burn in endless torment because they didn't believe in Jesus? What real purpose did that serve? Was that good enough news to be called gospel? Was human life that despicable, that expendable? Was God that cruel or heartless? Was God's kindness that frail? Was God's justice that severe? Was that kind of severe justice even just?

In the months that followed, my daughter's questions became my own: Did God, from the beginning, have two purposes in mind—one, to have some people eternally in torment, and two, to have others eternally in joy? Would a good Being ever conceive of such a plan? Or was God's original purpose to have only one ending—a happy one—but then accidents or disasters occurred that God couldn't see or prevent so that now the two ultimate destinations were an unwanted necessity? Or is it possible that God

has only one end in mind, the same one God has had from the beginning: to banish and eradicate all that is evil and save all that can possibly be saved?

These questions were generally followed by an avalanche of more immediate questions: What if I modified or jettisoned my orthodox idea of hell? What would go with it? Would any sense of ultimate justice or accountability remain? Could and would people be good without hell looming beyond death? Was hell a necessary deterrent to evil behavior? Would people assume that Jesus, church, the Bible, and Christianity itself are expendable, only marginally important when hell becomes less threatening? Would God evolve into our kind, doting, benign Grandmother in Heaven, so anything goes, so everything's OK, so all is groovy, have a nice day, whatever? Without the backbone of hell, would Christian faith become a kind of jellyfish religion, soft, spongy, transparent, negligible?

Questions like these can energize, but they had the opposite effect on me as I stared out at the empty blacktop, the brown winter lawns, the oak across the street still holding its old, dead leaves, the other trees looking naked and sad, the flurries falling randomly and melting on the driveway, the sidewalk, the front step. I felt completely drained by the uncertainty, the doubt, the nagging, nattering questions. I despaired of ever finding adequate answers to them; there were too many, and they were too hard. And something else happened as I stood at my storm door, my breath creating a slow pulse of fog against the glass. A hot, seething feeling I had hardly ever experienced started to form deep in me. It was so unfamiliar, I didn't know what it was it at first. It felt like it came from my gut and rose like heat through my heart and lungs. Then it rose further and lodged in my throat, and then it ached in my head with a feverish sentence I never expected, never could have predicted*: I hate Gil Zeamer. I hate that guy.*

When I realized what I was saying to myself, I literally shook my head and placed my forehead against the cold glass. *What's happening to me? I shouldn't hate anybody, even Gil. Where is this coming from?* A chill tightened my shoulders, and I stepped away from the glass storm door, closed the wooden front door, and went and sat on the sofa in the living room. *What's going on? I shouldn't hate. But I do—I hate Gil Zeamer.* I prayed—"God, don't let me become bitter. Help me understand Gil, forgive him, love him. Don't let me hate. Teach me to process this in some other way." And gradually the feeling passed, and I thought I was over it for good. I put on a sweater and went into the dining room to work on my puzzle, hoping it would distract me from morbid and troubling thoughts of hell and hatred. That night, though, the feelings came back, and I wrote that melodramatic entry in my journal.