

MARK CHIRONNA

RISING  
WITH  
HOPE



A 30-DAY DEVOTIONAL  
*for* OVERCOMING ANXIETY  
*and* DEPRESSION

*RISING*  
WITH  
*HOPE*

Books by Mark Chironna

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*On the Edge of Hope*

*Rising with Hope*

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WITH  
*HOPE*

A 30-DAY DEVOTIONAL  
*for* OVERCOMING ANXIETY  
*and* DEPRESSION

MARK CHIRONNA

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To my grandchildren—  
Ariana, Mark, Londyn, and Enzo:  
I love you more each day.

## By Grace I Endure


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In the crucible of profound suffering, life  
stretches into an eternal moment,  
An existence under siege, where every  
breath is an act of defiance,  
Haunted by a relentless shadow, a  
depression that hangs heavy,  
An anxiety that winds its icy fingers around  
my heart, squeezing till it feels ready to burst.

Sleep, a promised refuge, betrays, morphing  
into a cruel illusion,  
The nights spent in a deafening silence, a  
stage for my restless mind,  
Haunted by the ghost of peace, a specter  
fading with each passing second,  
Every tick of the clock a reminder of the  
battle that rages in the solitude.

Pain, an uninvited guest, sets up residence,  
its weight unbearable,  
A desire to shed the skin, to escape the  
prison of tormenting sensations,  
Yet held captive in my own flesh, where  
suffering paints its masterpiece,  
A portrait of a soul in turmoil, an  
embodiment of enduring.


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It's a storm that swallows the horizon,  
turning day into an endless night,  
The familiar morphs into a threatening  
landscape, hope seems a foreign language,  
Yet clung to every moment is a desperate  
hope, a life raft in a sea of despair,  
A testament to the tenacity of my spirit,  
hope against hope, a beacon in the storm.

When the season shifts, it is not with the  
fanfare of victory,  
But with the quiet humility of a survivor  
taking my first step into a new dawn,  
Emerging from the shadow not with a leap,  
but a gentle stride,  
A slow unwinding from the night, a testament  
to a strength discovered in the depths.

For in the heart of the storm, in the grip of  
despair,  
Grace weaves its quiet magic, a thread that  
holds when all else gives way,  
From the ashes of a life upended, arises a  
phoenix, testament to survival,  
A silent proclamation, that even in the face  
of life's storms, by grace, I endure.



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# INTRODUCTION

As I pen these words, we have entered the Lenten season, the sacred calendar's reminder that we are ever moving toward the fullness of redemption. Whatever the season, I never tire of celebrating Christ's resurrection, even as I realize that His sufferings were quite dark. What God accomplished in that darkness reaches beyond our conscious grasp and overcomes our sinful human condition and the death that held its grip on us all.

Mark's gospel tells us, "When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mark 15:33–34). The text describes a three-hour darkness not unlike the three-day plague of darkness that fell on Egypt (see Exodus 10:21–29).

Does that scene remind you of a dark time in your life, maybe even your current season? Do you feel stuck in a position that you cannot escape? Are you intensely anxious because you feel yourself being stretched in every direction?

Think about any deep-seated fears that may be nagging at you. Do you sense a deep dread as though your life were hanging in the balance? And amid all of that, does it seem that God is nowhere to be found?

Jesus experienced all of that on Good Friday. If we live long enough, you and I will face similar experiences. Once He bent His knees to pray in Gethsemane, Jesus entered our existential dread and anxiety and faced the intense agony of our primal fears. He sweat drops of blood as He allowed the agony to overtake Him. Terrible as it was, *it was the beginning of our deliverance from sin and death*. Jesus collapsed under the weight of our human darkness, yet He arose from prayer devoted to the will of God, knowing that the Father would glorify Him because of His self-sacrificial, self-emptying love.

Our seasons of suffering are not as intense as what Jesus endured. Yet we can feel overwhelmed and powerless in the presence of our primal fears and the dread of not knowing what's next or whether even more pain awaits us around the corner. We can know this, however: Our trouble will not last forever, as this devotional will show. It is designed to move you through the “My God, my God, why?” experiences, reassuring you that your present season is not a life sentence.

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321 CE) wrote one of the greatest classical pieces of literature of all time, and its significance endures to this day. I mention it for a reason. *Divine Comedy* is in three parts, beginning with *Inferno*, the journey through hell that started on Good Friday. Dante opens his journey to Sheol this way:

In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself, in a dark wood, where the direct way was lost. It is a hard thing to speak of, how wild, harsh, and impenetrable that wood was, so that thinking of it recreates the fear. It is scarcely less bitter than death: but, in order to tell of the good that I found there, I must tell of the other things I saw there.<sup>1</sup>

I want to remind you of the dream I shared in the epilogue of *On the Edge of Hope*. The dream occurred at the very beginning of the three-and-a-half-year dark season the book describes. For sixteen years now, I have lived with that dream, reflecting on it again and again. I relate it to Dante's words, because I felt as though hell itself had swallowed me up. I wasn't at midlife as Dante was. But I was in the middle of a season when I thought that anything I could ever want was being made possible for me—until I reached my “dark wood.” Ultimately, that crisis—the most intense of any I have ever faced—became my life's midpoint. Since then, I speak of my journey in terms of “before” or “after” my dark season.

Such seasons tend to surprise us. Dante describes a place that seemed haunted, a place he did not expect to encounter when he did. He was “off the beaten path,” with no GPS and no sense of how to move forward. In the language of one psycholinguistic expert, Dante was in a territory without maps,<sup>2</sup> a place he found hard to articulate. I get it—I've been there! Talk about a place that is “wild, harsh, and impenetrable”! That is where I was—and where you might be now.

When Dante talked about his experience afterward, he felt all the fears all over again. When Chosen Books asked

me to write about my “dark wood” encounter, it was fifteen years after the fact. I indeed felt those fears all over again, but from a different place of understanding them. I can relate to Dante’s “scarcely less bitter than death” comment, yet like him, I found good in my dark season! That was the reason I wrote the book, and it’s why I am writing this devotional.

God directs our paths even when we are not as conscious of our reality as we might be. Often, more things are happening of which we are *unaware* because we are not conscious of them. Until something significant happens—a dark wood of some kind—we remain “asleep.” Then, when we least expect it, the darkness awakens us, and we realize our need to become more fully and consciously attuned.

The resemblance between Dante’s intro to his *Inferno* and the beginning of my dark season grips me for many reasons, not the least of which is the dream that launched my trial. In that dream, I faced an open door leading from the basement of my grandparents’ home to a dark-wooded, dark-clouded ancient graveyard somewhere in Europe. As dreams do, this one enabled me to see and do things that would be impossible in waking life. There was no lower-level basement door leading to the outdoors from my grandparents’ actual home. And no such door could have led me into medieval Europe, before an ancient grave with a huge granite Celtic cross that was green with oxidation on one side.

From where I stood, I saw tree roots forcing the left-hand corner of the cross upward at an angle. (There are so many significant metaphors from my unconscious here!) As I stood there, I felt a heavy sense of dread and terror, but also awe

and reverence. Something significant was in the atmosphere as I stood on holy ground, terrified. I think it must have been that way for the children of Israel as they stood below Mount Sinai, the entire mountain surrounded by dark clouds and seemingly ablaze as the ground shook and they trembled (see Exodus 19:16–25).

At the time of my graveyard dream, I had little or no awareness of what the dream was trying to tell me. I understand much more of it now. I was having a numinous encounter, an experience with the holy, sacred, and mysterious otherness that defies logical explanation. All you can do in such moments is say, “Woe is me, for I am undone!” (Isaiah 6:5 NKJV). The encounter affected me spiritually and psychologically. I was profoundly aware of being unaware, specifically of how much I did not know but needed to know.

I was in a dark place—my own internal basement hidden under layers of conscious awareness. It was the realm of things stored so deep that I was unconscious of them. The house was familiar enough because I had grown up in it. But now the house was deep inside me. It was my internal home where the things I had long forgotten remained unconsciously alive and present. They were tied to fears of death and of the unknown dark places that were represented by barren, somber trees and the ancient gravestone.

I was reminded that the ancient Celtic Christians were powerful missionaries living in a challenging era of persecution and violence. Even in the toughest places, they managed to preach the gospel and operate in signs and wonders. I knew the gravestone attested to someone’s testimony in

Christ Jesus during a difficult time in history. The thought arrested me! I felt a little like Ebenezer Scrooge at his burial plot, begging the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come to give him another chance at life.

In my dream, the heavy granite gravestone sitting atop the remains of a former saint had been there so long that the roots of a huge tree now partially dislodged it. The site was weathered, in need of attention and care. I didn't realize it at the time, but the dream was telling me something about myself and about the attention and care I would need, not only to weather the hard season ahead but to be healed.

Please let this devotional take you on a journey to reveal what might be buried below the levels of your conscious awareness. Let it take you to the place where Christ's death and life are continually being applied to any unfinished business that needs your attention. I trust that the dark wood depicted by my dream will be a metaphor for the journey back from the grave to newness of life in the resurrected Jesus. May you encounter His numinous presence as you pray through this little book.



DAY

1

# Firmly on the Edge of Hope

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me.

Psalm 23:1–4

## Thoughts of Hope

Beloved, the last place you or I would choose to visit is what David called “the darkest valley.” Like Dante’s dark wood or

the graveyard I visited in my dream, such places are probably not among your most desired destinations. Nevertheless, God's chosen king went there. In fact, the Scriptures reveal he visited the place more than once.

Like it or not, you visit it, too. You might be there now, crying out to God and begging Him to lead you out of your "bad dream." I don't know what kind of anguish you are facing, but I know the mark it leaves. I know how it feels to be trapped in a situation without exits, a place where relief seems nonexistent and the pain seems too great to bear. You try to fix whatever is broken, only to realize that you cannot fix yourself. Your only hope is that your Shepherd will say, "Pack your bags! We're heading back to those green pastures I told you about."

Having lived a little and pastored for many years, I know that when you want out of a dark season, you can misunderstand what is happening there. Pain is disorienting. Explaining your pain is difficult, and processing it is even harder. What you believe about suffering can also complicate matters. You may have heard a sermon about how Christians should never suffer. Maybe a friend told you that sickness and sorrow are signs of weak faith.

Nobody wants to admit they are suffering with that kind of condemnation coming at them. Crossing your dark valley is hard enough; being accused of faithlessness is an added burden you don't want or need. For the record, all people suffer. If suffering were a sign of weak faith, David would never have suffered. He was a man of great faith—not a perfect man, but a man who believed God.

Of course, there is another reason we don't acknowledge our dark woods: We feel unable to make sense of them. They are confusing, and they reveal how much we don't know about ourselves and our struggles. That is how it was in my dream. I knew I was terrified, but the reason escaped me. I had buried experiences so deep in my unconscious mind that I lost sight of them.<sup>1</sup> I could not acknowledge what was buried because I did not know I had buried it!

Sometimes you cannot see what you covered over until a crisis forces it back to the surface. Then you cannot unsee it. It doesn't matter who you are or what you do. Even if you spend your life helping others, you are not exempt from the kind of suffering that seems to come out of nowhere. You might feel, as I did, like you have been hit by a bus. If you had seen that bus coming, you would have jumped out of the way. But you didn't see it, at least not consciously. You did not notice the storm that was brewing, so you did what most of us do when we are in the dark about ourselves, our wellness, and the issue of suffering—you put one foot in front of the other and kept going.

Being human, I know how that works. I have been there, done that, and bought all the T-shirts. The good news is that, regardless of what you do or do not know, you are firmly planted on the edge of hope. Why? Because the all-knowing God is gracious and merciful and continually invites you to rediscover the parts of yourself you tucked away. He will not leave you to navigate your dark valleys alone. Your Shepherd is “the God of hope” who fills you “with all joy and peace

in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).

//////////////////// **Moving in Hope** //////////////////////

During life’s difficult times, and even your most painful seasons, know these two things:

- As long as the Shepherd is in the dark valley with you, you are not without hope. Even if the darkness conceals the green pastures from your sight, your Shepherd will lead you to lie down in their midst.
- Jesus’ love for you is unending. No matter how strong or weak you feel, His love never wavers. Do you seem to be in a godforsaken place of loss, despair, or disease? Your Shepherd is with you. Even if you didn’t see the bus coming, He did, and He has prepared the way for you.

//////////////////// **Praying in Hope** //////////////////////

*Father, although I am struggling with the idea, I thank You that You truly are the God of all hope. May Your Spirit help me look to Jesus, who is the forever horizon of my hope and the author and perfecter of my faith. Amid the darkness, let Your good Spirit reveal the horizon at the edge of my current valley*

*of shadows. As I lean on Your indwelling Spirit to strengthen my will and urge me forward, may Jesus, my light, pull me into the future that lies beyond the shadows and lead me one step at a time. In His name I pray. Amen.*

DAY

2



## Pay Attention

When you turn to the right or when you turn to the left,  
your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the  
way; walk in it.”

Isaiah 30:21

### Thoughts of Hope

Even in our fast-paced world, the truth continually beckons. Signs are flashing around you and within you. The better tuned your attention is, the sooner you will see them. Like my dream before my dark season, the signs are telling you where you are spiritually, physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Although they are there for your benefit, they

seem to show up at the most inconvenient times, amid the pressures of the moment.

Beloved, pressure is always present. There is no convenient time to pay attention. The least convenient time is when the bus is coming at you and it's too late to step out of the way. So listen to your body's warning signs before the bus approaches. Value yourself enough to act on what they are telling you. Care for yourself the way you care for those you love. Observe what your mind and body are saying, or you will be forever driven by the things you think you need or ought to do. Pay attention to your feelings and honor them. Yes, they can be fickle. And yes, you are called to live by faith rather than by sight. But faith does not ignore feelings. Faith considers feelings in the light of truth.

You have probably heard teachings about how your feelings undermine your faith. I've heard those teachings, too. They sound good because they encourage us to "be strong in faith" and "overcome." We were built to overcome, but our feelings are not our enemy. Such an idea misunderstands how we were created to function, and many Christians have sacrificed their well-being because of it.

There's no condemnation here. I ignored my feelings for years, "blowing and going," as they say, and burning the candle at both ends. I exercised every single day and still do. I took loads of vitamins and ate the right foods (and still do). I was pretty proud to say that I took no prescribed medications. But I wasn't paying attention to what I was feeling. I ignored my stress levels and the effects of my sleep deprivation and restlessness. I shushed the voice that warned

me to slow down, and I willed my way through my exhaustion. Finally, my body refused my demands, and I landed in the darkest place I ever could have imagined.

Does my experience resonate with you? Are you trying too hard to perform? Are you doing it at an unsustainable level? If you feel compelled to accomplish everything that is demanded of you and everything you demand of yourself, the answer to all three questions is yes. You are running on adrenaline more than you realize and becoming your own worst enemy—not because you want to crash and burn but because you have taken on more than you were called to carry.

Running on adrenaline can become a way of life, but it won't work forever. It *is* the perfect way to lose touch with what your body and mind are saying. You might be performing like a superhero and getting high marks from those who marvel at your strength, but you might also be running on fumes. Adrenaline will conceal your exhaustion, maybe even for decades, but eventually, something will have to give. And that something will force you to pay attention.

To honor your feelings does not dishonor God. You are fearfully and wonderfully made with the divinely ordained ability to have feelings. If you heed them, they will tell you what you need to know to overcome for the long term. So slow down. Take your foot off the accelerator long enough to get the rest you need. Give yourself permission to stay healthy in mind and body. Establish better sleep patterns. Observe the Sabbath and regularly disconnect from your daily routine.

If you are suffering from anxiety, pay attention and get whatever help you need. Let your pain expose the drivers that are contributing to your suffering. God already knows about your anxiety. So go ahead! Lay it (and any other issue) bare before Him. Allow Him to expand your hope by showing you better ways forward. He will lead you to healthier, happier days, in Him, with Him, and by His Holy Spirit.

//////////////////// **Moving in Hope** //////////////////////

If you learn anything from life's dark seasons, learn to pay attention. Your feelings are there for a reason. Consider this:

- Your feelings are important. What makes them feelings is the fact that you feel them in your body.
- When your body tells you how stressed, angry, or burned out you are, listen. Ignoring these signs means ignoring a trustworthy witness, the voice of the very Spirit who calls you toward life.
- Remember that faith does not call you to ignore the truth. It gives you the courage to face your feelings and learn from them.

//////////////////// **Praying in Hope** //////////////////////

*Father, my anxiety has gotten the best of me, and I am finding it hard to rest and let go. Forgive my penchant for controlling what is beyond my control and wanting*

*to know what is beyond my knowing. Please help me not to ignore the truth but to pay attention as my body tells me to slow down. Help me not only to discern my body's cries but to heed them. Thank You for letting me feel the pain of my anxiety in my body. May it teach me to trust You and not myself. In Jesus' name, amen.*