

ONESIMUS FOUNDATION · PASTORAL WRITING

The Oldest Loneliness

*My relatives have failed me,
my close friends have forgotten me.*

JOB 19:13-14

NORM REED

The Oldest Loneliness is a book written for people in prison — for those who know what it means when the phone stops ringing and the visits stop coming. It takes its name from the oldest human ache: the longing to be known and to belong, and the grief of that longing going unmet.

Drawing from the Book of Job, it follows one man through the stages of that loneliness — betrayal, desertion, the long night, confusion, and anger — and then toward something unexpected: a cry that is heard, and a friend who does not leave.

This book is published through **The Onesimus Foundation** — named for the runaway slave in Paul’s letter to Philemon, a man written off by his world but restored to belonging through the grace of God. Onesimus means “useful” — and Paul writes to Philemon that he who was once useless has become useful indeed, both to Paul and to him. That is the tradition this book stands in. It was written for the people the world has written off, in the conviction that the God who sees everything stays anyway.

Eleven short chapters. Honest language. No easy answers. Written for the cell, the wing, and the long night.

FOREWORD

A Word Before We Begin

You didn't plan to be here.

Nobody does. But here you are — and if this isn't your first time, you already know something the first-timers are still learning. You know how the phone calls thin out. You know how the visits slow down and then stop. You know how the promises people made — and maybe the promises you made to yourself — have a way of not surviving contact with the real world.

You've been here before. And you told yourself last time it would be different.

Maybe it was, for a while.

This book isn't going to pretend otherwise. It isn't going to tell you that if you just think differently, or try harder, or find the right programme, everything will change. You've heard that. You may have believed it once. You may have believed it more than once — which takes a particular kind of courage that doesn't get acknowledged nearly enough.

This book is going to do one thing.

It's going to name something.

Something you probably already feel but have never had words for. Not because nobody thought it mattered. Because nobody gave you the words.

Loneliness.

Not the loneliness of being alone in a cell. You can be surrounded by people and feel it. You can have a full visiting room and feel it. You can have people who say they love you.

And still feel something underneath all of that which none of them can quite reach.

I suspect you know that feeling well.

I also suspect — somewhere in the back of your mind — you've felt a bit like Job.

Maybe you've never read his story. Maybe you only half-remember it from somewhere. But you know the shape of it. Man loses everything. The people he thought would stand by him don't quite manage it.

That part might feel familiar.

That feeling is worth following. It's older than you might think. And it goes somewhere you might not expect.

This book follows it. Not quickly — loneliness this deep doesn't yield to a quick answer. But honestly. One step at a time.

You don't have to believe anything yet. You don't have to sign up for anything. Just — be willing to recognise what you're actually feeling.

If the title of this book caught something in you — if the words *The Oldest Loneliness* landed somewhere that already knew what they meant — then you're in the right place.

Read on.

When the World Made Sense

There was a time when things were different.

You knew where you stood. You had your people — the ones who had your back,

the ones you'd grown up with, done time with, shared everything with.

The ones you'd have done anything for, and who you believed would do the same.

It felt like something solid. It felt like it would hold.

Most people can point to a time when life had a shape that made sense. Maybe you can picture it right now. A Saturday afternoon in someone's backyard, the smell of a barbecue, a beer in your hand, a few of the boys around you. Nobody talking about anything important. The footy on inside, someone giving someone else grief about last week's result, someone else arriving late with a bag of ice. An ordinary afternoon. The kind you didn't think to remember while it was happening because you assumed there'd be a thousand more like it.

Or maybe it's different. Early morning at the river, just you and a mate, lines in the water, not much being said. The kind of silence that's comfortable between people who don't need to fill it.

Those moments didn't feel significant at the time. They were just Tuesday. Just Saturday. Just the ordinary texture of a life with people in it. You didn't register them as precious. You assumed there'd be a thousand more.

You had your people. And your people had you. That was just how things were.

And there were the deeper ones. The people who knew where you came from. Who'd seen you at your worst. Who were still there the next morning. It felt like ground. You didn't think about it because you were standing on it.

Then something shifted.

Maybe it happened fast — a single night, a single decision. Maybe slowly, so gradually you didn't see it coming. Either way, you ended up here. And the life that had a shape started to look different from this distance.

Because distance does something to what you thought you knew.

The phone calls thinned out. The visits slowed. The people who said they'd be there — and some of them meant it — found that being there was harder than they thought. Life kept moving on the outside. And you stayed still in here.

And somewhere in the silence where the notification isn't coming — something settled in.

That feeling has a name.

It's loneliness. Not the word people use when they've had a quiet weekend. The real thing. The kind that sits in the chest and doesn't move. The kind you can feel in a room full of people. The kind that makes a full visiting room feel emptier than an empty cell, because at least the empty cell doesn't pretend.

It's the oldest feeling there is.

Take that with you. You don't have to do anything with it yet.

Here is what matters before this chapter ends.

The fact that it hurts means something.

Loneliness is only possible if connection was real first. You can't lose what you never had. The ache isn't a sign that you were stupid to trust or foolish to need people. It's a sign that you're human. That you were made for something — for real friendship, for belonging, for the kind of knowing and being known that goes all the way down.

You were built for that. And its absence does something real to you. That's not weakness. That's just true.

There is a man — in the oldest piece of wisdom writing that exists — who knew this feeling from the inside. What he found in the silence that followed is where this book is going.

For now, just carry the word.

Loneliness.

You know what it means. You've known for longer than you might have admitted.

CHAPTER TWO

The Ones Who Came

They came.

I didn't ask them to. I wouldn't have known what to ask for.

But they came — and when they saw me, really saw me,

saw what had happened, saw where I'd ended up — they didn't say a word.

They just sat down.

I didn't know then how much that would mean.

Think about who showed up.

Not the ones who said they would and didn't. Not the ones who sent a message, or heard through someone else and meant to come, or had reasons that were probably genuine. We'll get to the ones who didn't come another time.

Think about the ones who did.

Maybe it was someone you didn't even expect. Sometimes it's like that — the person you assumed would be first through the door is nowhere, and the person you barely thought about turns up and sits across from you in the visiting room looking like they're not sure what they're doing there either.

Maybe it was family. A parent, a sibling, someone who came because you were theirs and that was simply that — no calculation, no decision, just the instinct of someone who belonged to you showing up because where else would they be.

Maybe it was a mate. Someone who drove a long way, or took time off work, or navigated a system they'd never dealt with before — forms and booking times and what you can and can't bring — and did all of that without being asked, without making a thing of it, and sat across from you in a plastic chair under fluorescent light and didn't really know what to say.

That's the part worth sitting with.

They didn't know what to say.

You could probably see it on them. The way they looked at you and then looked away. The way the conversation kept starting and stopping. The way they asked how you were and both of you knew it was a strange question given where you were sitting, but neither of you had a better one.

They weren't eloquent. They didn't have answers. They hadn't come with a plan for fixing anything because there was nothing to fix.

So they just sat there.

And you just sat there.

For a while that was all it was. Two people in an uncomfortable room. One there because they had to be, one there because they chose to be.

At the time it might not have felt like enough. You might have wanted words — reassurance, something that sounded like hope.

Here's the thing though.

Those people — the ones who came and sat in the awkward silence — they were giving you something more valuable than they knew. More valuable than the people who came with advice and explanations. They were just there.

Most people, when they can't fix something, stop coming. Not because they're cruel. Because sitting with something you can't fix asks more than most people know how to give.

The ones who came anyway were doing something quietly extraordinary without knowing it.

That difference has a name.

It's presence. The kind that doesn't need to fix anything to be worth something.

Take that with you.

But perhaps no one came.

Maybe you know how the morning goes by now. You wake up and somewhere in the routine of it — not with great ceremony, just as part of how the day begins — you register whether there's a notification. Whether someone has arranged a visit. Whether your name is in that morning's list of people who have somewhere to be, someone coming.

There's nothing.

There's been nothing for a while.

And if you've been locked down — days at a time, the wing closed, the outside world simply not accessible — you've lost even the rhythm of checking. The days blur. The notifications don't come because the visits can't happen. And after enough of that you stop being sure whether no one is coming or whether no one can get through. Whether you've been forgotten or whether the system has simply made forgetting easier for everyone.

That not-knowing sits in a particular way.

But underneath it — if you're honest, in the quiet of the cell when the day hasn't filled itself with noise yet — there is something that keeps looking anyway. Some part of you that still registers the absence of a notification as an absence. Not just an administrative fact. A human one.

That's the longing. Quiet, maybe. The hope you've stopped admitting is hope because it's easier that way.

But it's there. It keeps being there.

And that matters.

You don't feel the absence of something you were never meant to have. The fact that the missing notification lands somewhere — even quietly, even after all this time — tells you something about what you were built for.

You were built for someone to come.

That no one did is not the verdict on your worth. It is simply the oldest loneliness in its most unguarded form. The longing that hasn't even had the consolation of being met and then lost. Just the longing, in the cell, in the morning, with nowhere to go.

Take that with you.

There is a man at the centre of the oldest story of loneliness ever written who knows both of those experiences.

His friends came. They travelled a long way. And when they arrived and saw him — really saw him, saw the state he was in — they didn't say a word.

For seven days they just sat with him. In the dust, in the silence, in the wreckage of a life that had stopped making sense. Something in them knew that words weren't what was needed. That the only honest response was to stay.

Those seven days were the best thing they ever gave him.

But even with his friends sitting beside him in the ash heap — even with people who came, who cared, who sat in the silence —

He was still lonely.

What he needed was beyond what they had.

We're heading toward what that was.

For now — whether someone came or no one did — you know what was missing.

That knowing is where this book begins.

And it is, it turns out, the beginning of something.

Betrayal

They stayed. For a while, that was enough.

Just their presence. Just the silence.

Just the fact of them being there when they didn't have to be.

And then they started talking.

And I wished they hadn't.

There's a particular moment most people can point to.

Not the moment someone left. Not the moment the phone stopped ringing. A different moment — earlier than that, harder to name, and in some ways more damaging than the absence that followed it.

The moment someone who said they were on your side opened their mouth.

And what came out wasn't what you needed.

Maybe it was advice. Careful, well-meaning. All of it technically true, perhaps. All of it landing like a stone.

Maybe it was explanation. A version of events they'd worked out that needed you to fit into it. As if the point of you sitting where you're sitting was to confirm what they already suspected.

Maybe it was something quieter. Not advice, not explanation. Just a shift in how they looked at you — like someone to be managed rather than known.

You felt it. Even if you couldn't name it. Something that had been one thing became another thing.

That's the moment.

Not dramatic, necessarily. Not a fight, not an accusation, not a door slammed. Just — a shift. The person who felt like someone who knew you becoming someone who was trying to figure you out. The friend becoming, quietly, something closer to a judge.

You probably didn't say anything. What would you say? They meant well. They came. So you let the words land and kept the things that would have pushed them away to yourself.

But something changed.

Something that had been trust became something more careful. You started performing okayness for the people whose okayness you needed. And the loneliness — the one that had briefly lifted when they came and sat with you — settled back in. Deeper this time. Because now it was inside the relationship rather than outside it.

That's the loneliness of betrayal.

Not the betrayal of someone who abandoned you. The quiet betrayal of someone who stayed but stopped seeing you. Who was present in body but somewhere else in spirit.

Being with someone. And being with your feelings about someone.

They are not the same thing.

Take that with you.

Because in the oldest story, this is exactly what happened.

The man's friends came and sat with him in the silence. They did the right thing.
And then they opened their mouths.

They needed him to make sense. And he didn't make sense. And when the gap
got too wide, they became his prosecutors.

That's what betrayal usually looks like.

The man felt it.

And he said so.

Not quietly.

We'll get to that.

But for now — you know the version of yourself you've been performing for the
people whose presence you need.

That performance is exhausting.

And you've been doing it for long enough.

Desertion

They said they'd be there.

They meant it when they said it.

You know they did.

They're just — not there.

People leave.
Not all at once. That would almost be easier.

They leave slowly. One by one. The calls get shorter. Then less frequent. Then they stop.

The visits thin out. Then they stop too.

At first there are reasons. Good ones, probably. Life is busy. It's a long drive. The kids are playing sport on Saturdays. Work has been hard. They'll come next week. They'll call on the weekend.

Next week comes. The weekend comes.

Nothing.

And you tell yourself it's fine. You tell yourself you understand. Because you do understand — life keeps moving out there. You know that. You don't begrudge them that.

But understanding something doesn't stop it hurting.

Here's what nobody tells you about being in here.

It's not the big things that get you.

It's the small ones.

It's someone's birthday you can't be at. A family dinner you're missing. A mate's wedding. A funeral. The ordinary Tuesday night in front of the telly that you didn't know you'd miss until it was gone.

It's the realisation, slow and quiet, that life out there is going on without you.

And the people in that life — the ones who said they'd hold your place — are finding that harder than it sounds.

So they stop.

Not because they're bad people. Most of them aren't. Not because they stopped caring. Some of them still care — you can hear it in the occasional message, the rare call, the Christmas card that arrives late.

But caring and staying are different things.

And one by one, the people who cared chose — without quite deciding to — the easier thing.

They moved on.

And you stayed here.

That's desertion.

Not a betrayal with a face on it. Not someone looking you in the eye and walking away. Just — the slow disappearance of people who once made up the shape of your life.

One day you realise the list of people you can count on has gotten very short.

Maybe it's just one or two names now.

Maybe it's none.

And the silence where those people used to be — that silence has a weight to it. You feel it in the morning when there's no notification. You feel it on weekends when the visiting room fills up with other people's families. You feel it at night when the noise of the wing dies down and there's nothing between you and the quiet.

That weight has a name.

It's loneliness. The kind that's been building for a while. The kind that doesn't arrive all at once but accumulates. Visit by visit. Call by call. Name by name. Until you're left with the silence.

Take that with you.

Here's what I want you to know though.

The fact that they left doesn't mean you weren't worth staying for.

Read that again.

The fact that they left doesn't mean you weren't worth staying for.

People leave for all kinds of reasons. Mostly reasons that are about them — their capacity, their fear, their own lives pressing in. The person who stops visiting isn't making a statement about your worth. They're making a statement about their limits.

That doesn't make it hurt less. But it matters that you know the difference.

In the oldest story, the man's friends came at first. They sat with him. They talked, even if the talking made things worse rather than better.

And then, one by one, they ran out of things to say.

And they went home.

And he was left in the ash heap.

Alone.

Not because he wasn't worth staying for. But because what he needed was beyond what they had to give. Because the kind of staying he needed — unconditional, inexhaustible, nothing-you-do-will-make-me-leave — that was beyond any of them.

It might be beyond anyone you've ever met.

But here's the thing.

The man in the ash heap — in the middle of his desertion, in the silence where his friends used to be — started to understand something.

What he was looking for existed.

Not in the friends who left. Not in the ones who stayed but stopped seeing him. Somewhere else. Someone else.

A friend who doesn't leave.

Not because they haven't seen the worst of you. But because they have — and they're still there.

We're getting closer to that.

But for now — the names that used to be there. That aren't anymore.

Not with bitterness. Just honestly.

They left.

You're still here.

And the fact that you're still here — still reading, still looking, still carrying the longing — that means something.

It means you haven't stopped believing a real friend is possible.

Hold onto that.

It's going to matter.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Long Night

There's a time of night when everything gets louder.

Not the noise of the wing. That dies down.

Your own thoughts. They get louder.

And in that silence — in that particular darkness —

some things are hard to hold onto.

Like the reason you're still here at all.

You know the time.

Maybe it's two in the morning. Maybe three. The wing has gone quiet. The sounds of the day — the noise, the movement, the voices — all of it has settled.

And it's just you.

And your thoughts.

And the thoughts that come at that hour are different from the ones that come in daylight. In the day you can keep busy. Keep moving. Keep the noise up. But at three in the morning there's nothing between you and what's actually there.

The people who aren't coming.

The life that's going on without you.

The question that doesn't have a clean answer.

What's the point.

Not said dramatically. Not a cry for help. Just a quiet thought that arrives in the dark and sits down and doesn't leave.

What's the point of any of this.

Maybe you've been here before. Maybe it's a familiar place — this particular darkness, this particular hour, this particular question. Maybe it arrives every night and you've learned to wait it out. Maybe it's getting harder to wait it out.

I'm not going to pretend I don't know what I'm talking about.

Some nights in that darkness the thought goes further than what's the point.

Some nights it goes all the way to — I wish I'd never been born.

Not a plan. Not a decision. Just an exhausted, hollowed out wish that existing didn't hurt this much. That you could just — not be here. Not in this cell. Not in this life. Not in any of it.

If you've felt that — if you feel it tonight — I want you to know something before we go any further.

You are not the first person to have felt it.

Not by a long way.

There is a man in the oldest story we keep returning to.

He lost everything. His friends came and then left or turned on him. He was sitting in the ash heap with nothing — no answers, no comfort, no sense that anything would get better.

And one night he opened his mouth.

Not to pray. Not to ask for help. Just to say what was actually true for him in that moment.

He cursed the day he was born.

He said — why was I ever born at all? Why did I come into the world to feel this? Why wasn't I just — nothing? It would have been better. Easier. Kinder.

He didn't dress it up. He didn't make it polite. He just said it. The rawest, most honest thing he had.

And here is what I want you to see.

He said it out loud.

He didn't swallow it. Didn't push it down. Didn't wait for the morning and pretend it hadn't been there. He let it out — into the darkness, into the silence, toward whatever or whoever might be listening.

And that — the saying of it out loud — was the moment everything began to shift.

Not immediately. Not with a sudden answer or a feeling of peace or a voice from heaven telling him it would all be okay. None of that.

Just — he said it. And saying it was different from holding it alone in the dark.

That's what I want to say to you tonight.

If the thought is there — if the darkness is that heavy — say it out loud.

To someone.

A chaplain. A counsellor. Someone on the wing you trust. Anyone.

Not because they'll fix it. They probably can't fix it. But because holding it alone at three in the morning is the hardest possible way to carry it. And you don't have to.

The man in the oldest story said it out loud.

And something heard him.

We're getting to that part.

But tonight — if this is where you are — don't hold it alone.

Say it out loud.

That's enough for now.

If you're in crisis tonight, tell someone on staff. Ask to speak to the chaplain. Ask to see a counsellor. You don't have to explain it perfectly. You just have to say — I'm not doing well. That's enough. They'll know what to do.

The darkness doesn't last forever.

The man in the ash heap didn't know that when he was in it. He couldn't see past the night he was in.

But the night ended.

It always ends.

And what he found on the other side — when the darkness had done its worst and he was still there —

That's where this book is going.

Hold on.

Confusion

You knew who you were.

You knew because of them.

And now they're gone.

And the knowing — it's harder than it used to be.

There was a version of you that made sense.

Not perfect. Not without complications. But a version that fit the world around it. That had a shape other people could see and recognise.

The bloke who showed up. The one people called. The father who was there at the game on Saturday. The mate who remembered your birthday when nobody else did. The person your family relied on even when they didn't say it.

That's who you were.

Not just in your own head. In theirs. You knew yourself partly because of how they saw you. The way your name sounded when someone said it who meant something to you. The particular face your kids made when you walked in the door.

That was real. That was you.

And now the people who held that version of you — most of them are gone. Or distant. Or looking at you differently than they used to.

And the version of you they were holding?

It's harder to find.

Here's something nobody tells you about losing people.

You don't just lose them.

You lose the part of yourself that only existed in relation to them.

The father exists in relation to the child. The mate exists in relation to the mates.

The person people relied on exists in relation to the people who relied on him.

Take the relationship away and that part of you doesn't disappear exactly. But it goes somewhere you can't quite reach. Suspended. Waiting.

And what's left — stripped of all the roles, all the relationships, all the ways other people confirmed who you were —

Is just you.

Without the context.

And that's a strange place to be. Stranger than most people admit.

Think about a morning in here when there's nothing on. No programme. No appointment. No one coming.

Just the day, and you in it.

Who gets up?

Not the role. Not the identity. Just — you. Without the confirmation that the roles used to give you every day without you even noticing.

Most of us have never had to answer that question before. We were always someone in relation to someone else. The question of who we are underneath all

of that — underneath the roles and the relationships and the way other people saw us — that question never had the space to arrive.

It has the space now.

And it arrives in the quiet.

Not shouting. Not dramatic. Just — there. In the morning. In the long afternoon. In the silence before sleep.

Who am I now?

That's the confusion underneath the loneliness.

Not just — where did everyone go.

But — who am I without them.

Take that with you.

The man in the oldest story knew exactly this.

He had a name that meant something. Everyone knew who he was. His identity was solid — built over years, confirmed every day by the people and the life around him.

Then it was gone.

And the friends who came — instead of sitting with the question — tried to answer it for him.

We know who you are, they said. You're someone who did something wrong and won't admit it. That's the story. That's why you're here.

They handed him an identity. Somewhere to stand. An answer to the question of who he was now.

And here is the thing about him that matters.

He said no.

He refused it.

Not because he had a better answer. He didn't. He was just as lost as you are. But he knew that their answer was wrong. That the version of him they were offering didn't fit the person he actually was.

Saying no to a wrong answer when you don't have a right one yet — that takes something.

Most people take the wrong answer. Because an answer — any answer — is somewhere to stand.

He held the question open instead.

That's what I'm asking you to do.

Not to figure out who you are yet. Not to find the answer.

Just to hold the question honestly. Without filling it too quickly. Without taking on the verdict other people have handed you — the system's verdict, the friends' verdict, maybe your own worst verdict about yourself.

Just — who am I, really?

Underneath all of it.

That question, held honestly, is the beginning of something.

We're heading there.

Anger

There's something in your chest.

Has been for a while.

You know exactly what it is.

You've just learned not to name it.

Picture the last time something happened that wasn't fair.
Not the big things. The small ones.

The decision that came down from someone who didn't know you and didn't ask.
The form that got lost and you had to start again. The visit that got cancelled with
no explanation. The way someone looked at you while they were deciding
something about your life.

You felt it land.

And you kept your face the way you've learned to keep it.

Because in here, you know what happens when you don't. So you took it.
Absorbed it. Filed it somewhere. And the day kept moving.

But the thing you filed — it didn't disappear.

Swallowed things go somewhere.

Into the jaw at night. Into the sleep that doesn't come. Into the replay that runs at three in the morning — the courtroom, the conversation, the moment when things went the way they went — with no way to stop it and nowhere to put it.

You're carrying something.

Most people in here are.

You've just gotten good at not showing it.

Name it.

You're angry.

At the system, probably. The way it looked at you while it processed you. The way decisions got made about your life by people who'd never met you and never would.

At specific people, maybe. Someone who put you here or contributed to it. Someone who got away with something you didn't. Someone who promised and didn't deliver.

At the people who left. The friends who became strangers. The family that's managed without you long enough that managing without you is starting to look permanent.

At yourself, maybe. For the choices. For the pattern. For being here again.

At God, if you believe in one. The silence where an answer should be.

All of it is anger.

And you've been carrying it quietly for a long time.

But here is something worth sitting with.

The anger is not a flaw.

It's evidence.

You don't get angry about something you never expected. You don't feel the injustice of something you never believed you deserved better than. Underneath all of it — the heat, the three in the morning replays, the swallowed words — is a conviction.

This is not how it was supposed to be.

That conviction is not weakness. It's not self-pity. It's proof that some part of you — even now, even after everything — still believes you were made for something better than this.

The anger is proof of that belief.

And that belief — battered and underground as it is — matters.

Anger is the sign you haven't stopped believing something better was possible.

The problem isn't the anger.

The problem is where it goes when it has nowhere to go.

Turned outward at the wrong targets — it makes things worse, gets you into situations you didn't need, costs you things you can't afford to lose.

Turned inward — it becomes something else entirely. The voice that says you deserve this. The decision to stop expecting anything because expecting things is what causes the pain. The numbness that settles in after long enough swallowing.

That numbness looks like peace from the outside.

It isn't.

It's a fire that's gone underground. Still burning. Just not where you can see it anymore.

The man in the oldest story was angry.

Not quietly. Not managed. Not performing a patience he didn't feel.

When his friends gave him their explanations — this happened for a reason, the reason is in you somewhere — he pushed back. He didn't accept their verdict. He said it wasn't true. He kept saying it wasn't true.

And when the silence continued — when the days in the ash heap kept coming and nothing changed and no answer arrived — he didn't go quiet.

He directed his anger at the silence itself.

He said — I need an answer. I need someone to hear this. I am not going to pretend this is acceptable.

The friends told him to stop. Said he was making things worse. Said a quieter version of himself might be better received.

He didn't listen.

And when God finally speaks — at the end of the story, after everything — he doesn't say to Job: you should have been quieter, more accepting, less angry.

He says: this man spoke what was true.

The anger that insists things are not as they should be — when things genuinely are not as they should be — that is the right response.

Not reckless. Not thrown at anyone who happened to be nearby.

But honest. Directed. Said out loud.

So don't give up the anger at the injustice.

Don't give up the anger at the gap between what is and what should be.

Don't let it go underground into the voice that says you deserve this.

That voice is lying.

The anger that still points outward — that still says this is not right — that anger is still alive.

And it's pointing somewhere.

Hold onto that.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Cry

The wing had gone quiet.

And something came out of your mouth.

Not to anyone you could name.

Just — out. Into whatever was there.

You didn't plan it.

But something in you wasn't finished yet.

You know the hour.

The noise of the day gone. The wing settled. Just the dark and the particular silence of a place where a lot of people are trying not to think.

And something escaped.

A word, maybe. Or something that was almost a word. Or just the physical act of opening your mouth and letting something go out — toward the ceiling, toward the dark, toward whatever might be on the other side of all of this.

You didn't decide to do it.

It just happened.

Maybe you remember it clearly. Maybe it's happened more than once, in different shapes, in different hours. Maybe you filed it away as nothing — talking to yourself, the mind doing what it does in the quiet.

But it wasn't nothing.

Something in you reached.

That reaching has a name.

It's a cry.

Not necessarily loud. Not necessarily in words. Not necessarily with any confidence that anyone is listening. Just — the sound that comes up from below thought and goes out toward something beyond sight.

The oldest human sound there is.

Every person ever pushed to the outer limit of what they can carry — in some dark hour — they make it.

And here is what it means when they do.

It means they haven't completely stopped believing someone can hear.

Think about that.

If you'd given up entirely — if the dark had gone all the way down — you wouldn't cry out. You'd just go quiet. Silence is what it looks like when a person stops believing anything is there.

The cry is different.

The cry says: I don't know if anyone's listening. I can't see who's there. I have no evidence this is anything other than sound disappearing into dark.

But I'm saying it anyway.

That's not nothing.

That's the thinnest possible thread of belief — but a thread. Still connecting. Still going somewhere.

The cry is still a form of life.

A cry is what you make when you've run out of people but not out of need.

The man in the oldest story got there.

He'd said everything to the friends. Given them every chance. And they'd given him everything they had — the explanations, the theology, the advice. None of it enough. Worse than not enough. It added weight rather than lifted any.

Every human option was exhausted.

And then he said something that has lasted three thousand years.

I know that my redeemer lives.

Not — I have met him. Not — I can prove this. Not — I have thought it through and arrived at a confident conclusion.

Just: somewhere, there is someone who will stand for me. Someone whose job it is to stand for the person who has no one left to stand for them. Not out of charity. Not because I've made myself deserving enough. Just — because that is what they are.

He didn't know who that was. Couldn't see a face. Had no idea how to find them.

He just cried out toward them.

Into the silence. Into the dark. Into whatever might be there.

And the cry didn't resolve into an answer. Not that day. Not soon. The ash heap didn't change. The silence didn't break open. The friends didn't suddenly understand.

But he sent the cry out.

And it went somewhere.

The cry you made — in your dark hour, when nothing human was enough — went somewhere too.

You didn't have to believe that when you made it. You don't have to believe it now.

But here is what I've learned, sitting with people at the far end of everything.

The cry always goes somewhere.

Not to the ceiling. Not into the dark. Somewhere further than that, and older, and more attentive than you had any reason to expect.

I can't prove that to you. The man in the ash heap couldn't prove it either — not that night, not for a long time after. The silence didn't break open. The ash heap didn't change. The morning after the cry looked identical to the morning before it.

But something had shifted.

Not in the circumstances. In the direction.

The cry is the moment the story turns. Not because anything visible changes. But because something has been sent out that will not come back empty. The oldest story tells us that. Three thousand years of people who made the same cry in their own dark hours tell us that.

You made it.

It went.

And what it went toward — we're going there now.

The Friend Who Was Always There

There's a version of you nobody has seen.

Not because you lied.

Because you learned.

The ones who stayed — the ones who kept coming —

they didn't see all of it.

You made sure of that.

You've become good at managing what people see.

Not lying. Just — selecting. Choosing which parts of the story to tell. Which version of yourself to bring to the visit. To the conversation. To the relationship you need to keep intact.

You know why.

You've seen what happens when people see too much. The shift in how they look at you. The careful distance that opens up. The moment a person who said they were your friend starts handling you rather than knowing you.

You learned the lesson.

The safest version of love is the kind where they don't know everything.

Think about the people who got closest to you. Who knew more than almost anyone.

Even them — there are things they don't know. Lines you skipped past. Not to deceive them. Just — you understood, somewhere below thought, that there was a limit to what the relationship could hold.

Every human friendship has a ceiling.

The ceiling is what the other person can handle.

Job's friends had one. Seven days of silence — the best thing they ever gave him. And then they reached it. They needed him to make sense. When he wouldn't — when his suffering refused to fit what they could hold — the friendship changed.

Not because they were bad people.

Because every human friend has a ceiling.

You've spent your life managing around them. Keeping the version of yourself that would push people past their limit carefully out of sight.

There's an old story about a monster who could only be loved by a blind man. Because the blind man couldn't see what everyone else ran from. The friendship was real. But it couldn't survive being seen.

That's the fear underneath all the managing.

That full sight and love cannot exist at the same time.

The man in the ash heap waited for an answer.

He'd said everything. The friends had said everything. The silence had gone on long enough that it had stopped feeling like waiting and started feeling like nothing was ever coming.

And then something broke.

Not gently. Not with comfort or explanation or the reassurance he'd been asking for.

Out of a storm.

A voice.

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Have you seen the gates of death? Can you bind the stars together or loose them? Do you know this? Have you been there? Can you do this?

Question after question after question. Not cruel. Not mocking. But vast. Opening out in every direction. The whole width and depth and age of everything that exists — held up in front of one man sitting in ash.

And something happened to Job in that moment.

Not what you'd expect.

He didn't feel small. He felt — seen. Spoken to. By something so large that the fact it was addressing him at all was itself the answer he'd been waiting for.

The God of the whirlwind wasn't a distant force that couldn't be bothered with one man's suffering. He was here. In the storm. Speaking. To Job specifically. To the man who had cried out in the dark.

And Job said the only thing there was to say.

Now my eye sees you.

Not — now I understand. Not — now I know why. Not — now it makes sense.

Now I see you.

The seeing was the answer.

Now — what that presence, that voice, that God saw when it turned toward Job.

Everything.

Not the managed version. Not the edited story. The anger. The accusations. The words thrown into the silence at three in the morning. Every part of the man the friends couldn't hold without flinching.

God held all of it.

And stayed.

Not loved because unseen.

Loved while fully seen.

That is what the word God means in this story.

Not a set of rules. Not a religious institution. Not the distant, disinterested force the silence of the ash heap seemed to suggest.

The one who sees everything — the whole account, the worst lines, the version of you that you've kept carefully out of sight — and doesn't move. Doesn't flinch. Doesn't start handling you rather than knowing you.

Still there.

This is a different kind of friend than any human friend can be. Not because human friendship is worthless. But every human friend has a ceiling. This friend has none.

Not the blind man's friendship — love that depends on not seeing. Something else entirely. Full sight. The whole picture.

And still there.

What Job discovered was that the fear was wrong.

Full sight doesn't end things.

Full sight — from this particular friend — is where things begin.

That friend was in the room when you made your cry.

Not into nothing. Not to the ceiling.

To the one who already knew everything you've kept back. Who had read the whole story — including the parts you're still living — before you'd finished.

You sent a cry into the dark without knowing who was there.

Now you know.

The one Job found in the whirlwind — the God who sees everything and stays — was already in the room with you when you made it.

Is in the room with you now.

Not waiting for the managed version.

Just there.

Fully seeing.

Not going anywhere.

Known

They have a file on you.

It knows a lot.

It doesn't know you.

There's a difference.

You know there's a difference.

You've lived on the wrong side of it.

Think about what's in that file.

Date of birth. Offences. Sentences. Assessments. Risk ratings. The decisions that got made about your life by people who read it carefully. And never knew your name the way someone who loved you knew it.

The file knows everything that can be documented.

But it doesn't know you.

It knows about you. It knows the record. It knows the pattern. It knows what the assessments said about your likelihood to do this again.

It doesn't know why you made the choices you made. Doesn't know what you were carrying when you made them. Doesn't know the version of events that

only you can see from the inside. Doesn't know the things you've never said to anyone.

There is a difference between being known about and being known.

You feel that difference every time the file is consulted. Every time a decision about your life gets made by someone holding a document rather than looking at you. Every time the documented version of you gets treated as though it's the whole of you.

The file doesn't know you.

There is a word in the oldest story that means the opposite of the file.

Sod.

A Hebrew word. It means the inner circle. The intimate ring where the real conversation happens. Where there is full disclosure. Not managed. Not edited. Not selected for what will be well received.

The king's sod was the handful of people trusted with everything. Not the outer court. The inner room. Where the real things were said. Where nothing had to be performed.

Psalm 25 says: the sod of the Lord is for those who fear him. He makes known to them his covenant.

God has a sod. An inner circle. Not a religious transaction. Not a performance of correct behaviour. An actual exchange. An intimacy.

And he invites people in.

Job had this. He described it as the sod of God over his tent. The inner ring. Being known and trusted. The real conversation available to him.

And when it was gone, the loss of it sat at the centre of everything else.

Not the wealth or the family or the health — though those losses were real. The deepest loss was the sod. The intimacy of being fully known by the one who made him.

And what he found in the whirlwind — what the encounter gave back — was the sod restored.

Not because he had explained himself adequately. Not because the friends' verdict had been satisfied. Not because he had found the right religious form.

Because God came.

And looked.

And stayed.

The God who knows the whole indictment. Every line in every file. Everything that was never filed.

And stays anyway.

That is what it means to be known.

Not known about. Known.

Not the documented version. Not the pattern, not the risk rating, not the managed presentation.

The whole thing. All the way down.

And held there. In the inner ring. Called friend.

Here is what that changes.

It changes what you have to carry alone.

For years — most of your life, probably — you have been the only one with the complete picture. Everyone else got a portion. The version you trusted them with. The selection that kept the relationship intact. You carried the rest yourself, because there was nowhere else to put it.

The sod means there's somewhere to put it.

Not because it will be fixed or resolved. But because the one who knows it is not going to move. Not going to need it to make sense. Not going to reach their ceiling.

There is no ceiling.

The whole picture. Held. Not dropped.

That is different from anything any human friend can offer.

Not a criticism of human friendship. The friends who came and sat in the silence gave Job something real. They can give you something real. But they have a ceiling.

This friend's knowledge of you has no ceiling. His presence has no end.

You don't have to manage what he sees.

You never did.

He already saw it.

And he's still here.

That is what the word known means in this story.

Not processed.

Known.

The Overflow

Something grew here that you didn't plant.

In a place designed to take things away.

It doesn't stay in the cell.

It goes where you go.

A man once asked his son to bring a pack of playing cards on the next visit.

Not because there was nothing to do. He'd managed without cards for months. He asked for them because he'd learned to play in here. With a small group of men. Nothing special. Just an hour on Tuesday afternoons when the noise of the wing dropped and something else became possible.

He didn't want to leave that behind.

He wasn't sure he could explain it. It wasn't about the cards. It was about the table. The men around it. The particular thing that forms between people when nothing is required of them except to show up. He'd learned what that felt like.

And he wanted to carry it with him.

That's where this chapter lives.

Not what you came in with. What you found here. And what happens to it when it walks out the door with you.

You didn't find that by looking for it. You found it because you were here, and everything else was gone. That's exactly how Job found what he found. Not in a good year. In his worst one.

Here is what the oldest story says about how that works.

After the whirlwind. After the encounter. After everything had shifted — not the circumstances, not the ash heap, but the direction.

God said something to the friends.

Go to Job. Have him pray for you.

The friends who came and failed him. Who needed him to make sense. Who became his prosecutors in the place of his companions. Who had been wrong about almost everything.

Go to him. Have him pray.

And Job — who had every reason to hold the fist closed, to say nothing, to let these men find their own way —

Job prayed for them.

Not after a long struggle. Not with great ceremony. He just — did it. Opened his hand toward the people who had failed him most and sent something out.

And here is what happened next.

When Job prayed for his friends — in the very act of praying — the restoration came.

Not when he received.

When he gave.

The hand that opened toward the people who had hurt him was the hand that received everything back.

There is a Hebrew word for it.

Shub shevut. The turning of the turning. The restoration that comes through the open hand. The returning that moves through the interceding heart rather than arriving from outside it.

The open hand is not empty.

It is the receiving hand.

What being known all the way down does to a person — what it produces — is this.

It opens the hand.

Not because you've decided to be generous. Not because you've worked yourself up to forgiving people who haven't apologised. But because something given to you — freely, completely, without condition — changes what you have to hold onto.

The friend found in the cell becomes the capacity for friendship outside it.

Think about the men in your cell. On your wing. The ones you eat alongside whether you chose them or not.

Some of them you'd never have known on the outside. Some of them you'll never see again when this is over. But something formed between you that wouldn't have formed anywhere else.

Proximity. Shared time. The particular thing that happens between people going through something hard together. Having to be honest about it.

That's not nothing.

It's the beginning of knowing how to be with people. The kind of knowing you couldn't have learned anywhere that wasn't this hard.

And when you walk out — not just with what you came in with, but with the friend you found and what that friend has done in you — you walk out with something.

You know how to be present in someone else's pain without needing to fix it. You know what it costs a person to be honest. You know the weight of the silence that isn't emptiness. The silence between people who have stopped pretending.

You know what Job's friends forgot.

What to do when you can't fix anything.

Just — show up.

Stay.

That's the overflow. The friendship that survived everything — including you — moving out into the world.

Not because the cell made you a saint. Not because you're better than anyone.

Because something given to you completely is too large to keep to yourself.

Job prayed for the friends who had failed him.

And the restoration came through his open hand.

You don't have to be Job to know what that means now.

You've been in the ash heap.

You know what it cost.

And you know what arrived there that you didn't bring with you.

Take it with you when you go.

It doesn't belong in here.

Neither do you.

The Poem Isn't Finished

You made it to the end of this.

Wherever you are — on your bunk, somewhere between this page and whatever comes next — something has shifted. Maybe not something you can name yet. Just — a direction. A different way of standing in the same place.

That's how it starts.

Here is one more thing about Job's story that matters.

It's a poem.

Not a textbook. Not a case study. Not a formula for how suffering works or what it means or what you're supposed to do with it. A poem.

The oldest wisdom in the world looked at this man's life and said: this requires poetry, not explanation. Because explanation would flatten it. Because the truth of it is larger than any formula can hold.

Poems are allowed to have hard lines. Lines that hurt to read. Lines that look like damage until you can see the whole page.

The friends tried to turn Job's life into a textbook. They looked for the cause, the lesson, the point where it went wrong. He refused.

That's not the right kind of reading.

He was right.

Your life is more like a poem than a textbook.

You have made mistakes. You cannot avoid having made them. Some of them have cost you and others more than can be easily said.

What you are not allowed to do is let the mistakes become the whole reading.

A line is not the poem.

A chapter is not the life.

If this isn't your first time in here. If the pattern has repeated. The textbook reading says: same story, same ending, nothing changes.

The poem reading says something else.

You are in a longer story than you can see from here.

The repetition is not the conclusion. The pattern is not the verdict.

The friend Job found — the one who sees everything and stays — reads the whole poem.

Not just the hard lines. The whole thing. Every chapter. The ones that make sense and the ones that don't. The lines that look like damage and the lines that carry more weight than you knew.

And what he sees, he calls worth staying for.

Not because the hard lines aren't there.

Because the poem isn't finished.

You leave this book the same person who opened it. The circumstances haven't changed. The file still says what it says. The people who left are still gone.

But something has been named that didn't have a name before.

And you know there's a friend who was in the room when you cried out.

That's enough to go on.

Go well.

The road through the oldest loneliness is real.

You're on it.

These reflections did not begin with artificial intelligence. They began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During the development of this manuscript, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words that follow emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.

ONESIMUS FOUNDATION

© Norm Reed · hesedwords.com · All rights reserved