

A SAMPLE CHAPTER

KEPT

Sobriety, Grace, and the Hand That Won't Let Go

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CHAPTER FIVE

A God With Scars

I told you at the end of the last chapter that the cure was going to come from somewhere else entirely. Here is the somewhere. And I have to warn you before we go: it is the last place you would think to look, and it is going to offend everything religion has trained into you.

You have always assumed that to find God you would have to climb. That He lives *up* — up above the clouds, up at the top of the mountain, up at the far end of a long moral staircase you have never once managed to climb sober. And you assumed that to reach Him you would first have to become the kind of man who could make the climb: cleaned up, sobered up, respectable, presentable. Get your act together, and then approach. Everyone you have ever met seems to agree that this is how it works. It is certainly how most churches behave.

It is exactly wrong. And for a man at the bottom it is not merely wrong — it is cruel, because it leaves you out. You cannot climb. We have spent four chapters establishing that you cannot climb. If God is only at the top, then you are damned, and so is everyone honest enough to admit they can't manage the stairs.

But God is not at the top. That is the whole secret. He went the other way.

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Five hundred years ago Luther gave these two ways of looking for God their names, and the names are worth knowing, because you have been living under the wrong one your entire life.

The first he called a theology of glory. It looks for God in all the places you would expect to find someone important: in power, in success, in strength, in the winner, in the man who has his life together. It assumes the way up is the way to God — that holiness looks like improvement, that the closer you get to having it all handled, the closer you are to Him. It is the native religion of the human heart, and it is the air every addict has breathed since birth: get better, climb higher, and there at the summit you will finally meet God.

The second he called a theology of the cross. And it says something that sounds, at first, like madness: that God has chosen to be found not at the summit but at the bottom. Not in glory but in suffering. Not in the strong man but in a beaten one. Not where you would look for someone important — but hidden, in the very last place human pride would ever search, under the appearance of its exact opposite.

And here is how we know which one is true. We know because of where God actually showed up.

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When the eternal God came to reveal His heart to the human race — when He decided to show us, once and for all, exactly who He is and how He feels about us — He did not do it from a throne. He did it from a Roman cross.

Take in how strange that is. The God who could have come in unbearable glory, who could have split the sky open, came instead as a poor man from a backwater town, and He ended His life stripped, beaten past recognition, nailed to a post and hung up to die in public between two criminals while respectable people walked past and shook their heads. That is not the prelude to the revelation. That *is* the revelation. It is the single clearest picture of God that has ever been given. When you want to know what God is like, you do not look up at a glorious summit. You look at a dying man on a hill, and you say: there. That is Him. That is what He is like.

He is not ashamed of the bottom. He went there on purpose.

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And then comes the detail I cannot get past — the one that gives this chapter its name.

He rose. You know that. But here is the thing almost nobody stops to notice: when He rose, He kept the scars.

He did not come back polished and unmarked, the wounds erased, the body restored to some flawless *before*. He came back with the holes still in His hands. With the wound still in His side. And when one of His own men said he would not believe it was really Him unless he could touch them, Jesus did not rebuke him and did not hide them. He held out His hands and invited the man to touch the wounds — to feel for himself the holes the nails had left, and the gash in His side. The risen and reigning God of the universe offered His scars to a doubting man as the proof of who He was.

I want you to understand what that means for you. The God you are dealing with has scars. Forever. He is not a clean, untouched, faintly disgusted deity holding your wounds at arm's length. He has His own. He knows from the inside what it is to be in agony, to be abandoned, to cry out into the dark and hear nothing come back. There is a wound in the hand that is reaching for you. He is not above your suffering. He has been underneath it.

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Which means something I have to say slowly, because it is aimed straight at the thing that keeps you awake at night.

There is no bottom you can hit that is lower than where He has already been.

You are afraid you have gone too far. That this time, or some time back there, you crossed a line — did the thing, lost the thing, became the thing — past which nobody comes for you. That you have finally fallen below the reach of rescue. I am telling you it cannot be done. He has been to godforsakenness — He hung on that cross and cried out, *My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me*, and He meant it. He has been to death itself and out the far side of it. Whatever your bottom is, He is lower. He is underneath it. You cannot fall past Him, because He is already further down than you can fall, with His arms open, waiting to catch what drops.

That is the hand this book is named for. It is not waiting at the top of the stairs for you to climb up into it. It is underneath you, in the dark, lower than your lowest — and it does not let go.

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Do you see now why I spent four chapters insisting you cannot climb?

It was never to crush you. It was to get you to stop looking up. Because every religion of glory, every gospel that stations God at the summit, leaves a man like you with no hope at all. It is good news only for people who can climb — which is no one, and certainly not you, and you at least are honest enough to say so. The theology of the cross is the only good news that can reach the bottom, for one plain reason: it is the only one that says God is at the bottom. He is not at the top of your recovery. He is in the ditch. He always was.

You have been facing the wrong direction your whole life. You have been staring up, ashamed, certain He was far away and disgusted, waiting for you to make yourself presentable before He would have anything to do with you.

Turn around. Look down — into the very wreckage you are most ashamed of, the bottom, the ditch, the worst of it. He is there. He has been there the whole time. And He has scars.

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You are not alone in the ditch, and you never were. That much, by itself, would be enough to build a life on.

But the cross is not only God keeping you company in your suffering. Something *happened* there. A real transaction was completed; a verdict was handed down; a debt was actually paid, in that blood. He did not come down only to be with you at the bottom. He came down to *finish* something. And what He finished is the best news you have ever heard — better even than this — and it is the next chapter.

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The step underneath. The program is right to send you to the bottom. Hitting bottom is real, and Step One's powerlessness is true. But watch where it points you next: *up*. You hit bottom, and then you are told to reach up the mountain for a higher power, as though the bottom were only a starting line to leave behind. There is no step for a God who is already down there with you — and that is the one thing you most need to know. The real God is not found at the summit of your recovery; He is found at the bottom, in a crucified man. A higher power is something you ascend to. The God of the cross descended. You will never have to climb high enough to reach Him, because He came all the way down to where you already are.

From the chair. This week, find an image of the crucified Christ — not an empty cross, but Christ still on it: a small print, a card, a page out of a book — and put it somewhere you will see it every day. When the shame tells you God is far off and disgusted with you, look at it. It is not a decoration; it is the answer to the lie. That is where God went, and it is what He thinks of your bottom: He came down into it.

A word for you. You have not gone too far. You could not, even if you set out to. The God who is reaching for you has scars on the reaching hand; He has been lower than you have ever been or ever will be, and He came back up through death still carrying the

marks of it, so that you would never again wonder whether He understands. You do not have to climb to Him. You do not have to clean up first. Turn around. He is behind you, beneath you, down in the ditch — and He is not letting go.

Anchor.

Scripture — 1 Corinthians 1:18: the cross looks like folly to those heading for ruin, but to those being rescued it is “the power of God” — His strength hidden in what looks like defeat.

Catechism — “...with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.” (Luther’s Small Catechism, the Second Article)

*This is where the sample ends. The rest of KEPT is the invitation it
opens onto.*

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