



*Courage, Dear Heart*  
Letters to a weary world

MISFITS  
REJECTED  
ABUSED  
ROAD-WEARY  
SKERTICAL  
FEARFUL  
DISILLUSIONED  
HOMESICK

REBECCA K. REYNOLDS

I love this book, partly because I see myself in almost every page—my clumsy, halting, constantly faltering daily walk with God—but mostly because I recognize the gospel in almost every page: God’s mercy, patience, persistence, and faithfulness laid out in the most imaginative ways. This book is a wonderful accomplishment and an excellent read.

FERNANDO ORTEGA, singer-songwriter

To read this book is to take a journey. The eyes of your soul will open widely, and you will blink in wonder at how you had never seen what you see now. Rebecca Reynolds takes in hand language, literature, science, philosophy, theology, and her own life experience to explore those foundational questions that haunt and confuse us. Enjoy your journey!

SARAH VAN DIEST, author of *God in the Dark: 31 Devotions to Let the Light Back In*

Wisdom and compassion illuminate every beautiful sentence of this gospel-infused book. I love that Rebecca Reynolds chose the title *Courage, Dear Heart*. She’s one of the most courageous people I know, and her heart is one of the dearest. I hope this is the first of many books from her.

JONATHAN ROGERS, bestselling author

In *Courage, Dear Heart*, Reynolds enters into the depths of each reader’s messy human experience and puts her arm around them in friendship, offering compassion, wisdom, and hope. Reynolds speaks to all readers as a close friend,

immersing them in a rich narrative saturated with poetry, literary excerpts, Scripture, and authentic, sometimes painfully honest stories from her life and ministry. *Courage, Dear Heart* is the rare book that not only keeps vigil with readers in the shadows of their struggles but also compassionately walks beside them as they move once again toward the light. I am certain I will return to it many times to experience the grace woven into each paragraph of this wonderful book.

JOEL CLARKSON, author and composer; narrator of The Green Ember audiobook series

Written with imagination and compassion, these letters to a weary world will bring renewed vision and some much-needed courage to their readers.

MALCOLM GUTE, poet and singer-songwriter

*Courage, Dear Heart*



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Letters to a weary world

REBECCA K. REYNOLDS

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# Contents

## LETTER 1

*Hullo, Out There!: A Note to the Reader* 1

## LETTER 2

*I Know a Stranger: A Letter to the Rejected* 15

## LETTER 3

*Bird with a Broken Wing: A Letter to the Long-Suffering* 43

## LETTER 4

*Protein Soup: A Letter to Those Living in Chaos* 63

## LETTER 5

*Scared to Death: A Letter to the Fearful* 85

## LETTER 6

*The Kiss of the Mountain God: A Letter to the Skeptical* 107

## LETTER 7

*The Whisper at Our Backs: A Letter to the Disillusioned* 131

## LETTER 8

*Not All Who Wander Are Lost: A Letter to the Expat* 157

## LETTER 9

*All Things New: A Letter to the Homesick* 179

*Notes* 201



*Hullo, Out There!:*  
*A Note to the Reader*

I didn't understand how tired most Christians were until 2007. That year, I was working as a creative coordinator in a church of about two thousand members—a behind-the-scenes dream job for an introvert. At the beginning of every sermon series, the teaching team would talk with me about the main themes they wanted to convey and then invite me to design scripts, props, and visual art for Sunday mornings.

Easter needed to be special, so I talked our pastors into trying something risky. One week before the big service, we passed around baskets full of torn, colored tissue paper and asked our members to write a single word on their chosen piece—a word that captured their biggest sorrow or struggle.

“Keep your word anonymous,” I said. “Disguise your handwriting if you don’t want anybody to know which one is yours, but be real with whatever you write down. That’s important.”

My secret plan? To transform these papers into seven eighteen-foot, backlit windows—a massive symbol of God’s ability to turn brokenness into beauty. “Trust me,” I begged the teaching team. “This is going to be great.”

Yet this project that had seemed charmingly simple in my head ended up requiring hours of physical labor. For a week solid I worked, kneeling over huge frames made from wood and vinyl sheeting. Each tiny piece had to be decoupage so that it fit into a grand design, effort that was close and tedious. On my hands and knees, I read every single paper. *Abused. Cancer. Porn. Shame. Debt. Addict. Loneliness. My sexuality. Obesity. My mom. My son. HIV. Bankruptcy.*

I don’t know what Catholic priests feel when they sit listening to parishioners talk through hurt and shame, but I wasn’t prepared for the gravity of two thousand confessions. After a decade of ministry, I had expected to read hard words, so I wasn’t shocked by the *types* of struggles people admitted. The *volume* of the suffering of the church, though, knocked me flat. I didn’t unfold one paper that said *discouraged*—I unfolded two hundred. This single word was written in feminine script, in shaky old handwriting, in masculine block letters, and in teenage bubble letters. All around me, people were carrying terrible burdens. I couldn’t keep from crying as I spent those long days alone with the grief of the

church, realizing at last that every smiling face I passed in the hallways each week had a story to tell.

The hardest words were written in faint, tiny letters. In these, I saw how difficult it had been to tell the whole truth. Even anonymously, an admission of reality had been terrifying for some. How the Lord must ache as he looks down upon the bare sorrows of his people! With that awareness, the sacrificial system of the Old Testament finally made a little more sense to me. Nothing but fire, smoke, and blood could express the smoldering depths of human pain. The New Testament also rang clearer, since nothing but the infusion of divine life could ever redeem such widespread death. As beautiful as humanity is at times, we are also deeply messed up, too helpless for anything less than the rescue of a God. Never again would I look into a body of Christians with the delusion that most of us were mostly okay.

By Saturday, I had spent close to sixty hours working. My neck was stiff, and every muscle in my body hurt, so when a team of men hung those hulking frames from our sanctuary walls, I could barely lift my chin to see the result. Yet, as they flipped on the backlights, I was floored. It had worked. Two thousand sorrows exploded into bursts of color and light. Cadmium yellow centers, orange and crimson flames, cool recesses of green, pools of blue and violet—could redemption really be so beautiful?

When our worshipers walked into the sanctuary on Easter, they didn't know what we had prepared. But as we lowered the room lights and illuminated the windows, they gasped.

After church was over, they lingered in the sanctuary an hour or more, wandering until they found the tiny words that they had written. Then they looked outward, finding their confession surrounded by the confessions of others and realizing they weren't alone. The whole conversation was entirely anonymous, and yet it felt so intimate.

Friends threw arms around one another and prayed together, whispering. Others stood with their heads bowed. Some knelt. Eventually, the pastors decided to open the church during non-service hours so members could take time to process what we had discovered about ourselves and one another.

In some ways, I was reminded of New Yorkers post 9/11. Do you remember those first desperate hours, how strangers moved toward one another, bleeding and crying, leaning on one another's strength to walk through the rubble? Mass tragedy has a way of exposing our common frailty, and in such intersections of human tenderness and horror, all shields are down. Here we can at last confess, "The world is broken, and I am broken, and my need is dire."

## **Lonely in a Sea of Faces**

When life is going well, most of us keep hacking away at daily life with all our troubles packed deep inside us. Sometimes our stories are too heavy and too complicated to talk about. Maybe we don't think anybody will listen or care, or maybe we've already tried friendships that didn't work. Some of us are working too many hours to even think beyond this week.

So here we are, surrounded by people from early morning till late at night but never really knowing or being known. In fact, Americans are more lonely now than at any point in our national history. According to Janice Shaw Crouse, senior fellow at the Beverly LaHaye Institute, more than one-fourth of Americans claim to “have no one with whom they can talk about their personal troubles or triumphs. If family members are not counted, the number doubles to more than half of Americans who have no one outside their immediate family with whom they can share confidences.”<sup>1</sup> Think about that. More than half of us.

This epidemic of loneliness is no respecter of milieu. While we might expect isolation in a big city, even in a tight-knit rural community, it’s possible to feel like an outsider. Strong roots grow deep in small groups, but so do scars; if you’ve ever had to start over at ground zero of a small-town relational breakdown, you know how exhausting that whole process is. You have to get your nerve up to go to the grocery store because there’s no telling whom you’ll meet in the cereal aisle. Recovering local might make you stronger in the long run, but day in, day out, up-close survival wears you out.

Zooming out a bit more, social media can turn our lives into a lonely flurry of superficial interaction. We post pictures, chat, debate, rant, and empathize. We try to impress. We try to persuade. Yet in the thinness of these constant, disposable connections, the deeper needs of our souls are rarely satisfied. Twenty-four-hour access to dialogue doesn’t always equal twenty-four-hour access to true friendship.

One night, I was sitting in my bed, scrolling through social media while my husband sat next to me, reading on his phone. I wish I could tell you that this evening routine is rare for us, but it's not. We both work long hours, and by the end of the day, we're shot. The Internet isn't good for us, but it is easy.

That particular day had been huge in American politics, so hundreds of updates flashed across the screen. In one status, a political figure was honored as a national messiah. In another, he was demonized. In the crossroads of these two opinions, tempers ran high. Here was an earthquake in slow motion; fissures running through friendships, parent-child relationships, and churches. Names were called. Fifth-grade insults were thrown. Accusations were made. Lines were drawn in the sand. Because I love my country dearly, my own heart began to pound, eager to jump in and fight. I wanted to rip every bad argument apart. I wanted to rescue my republic. At the same time, I wanted to run away and hide. Facebook hasn't been the same for me since that election—not since I've learned that it can be a civil war battleground instead of a sidewalk cafe.

## **It's Complicated**

I don't know what's making you weary as you read this book. Some of you are divorced, and some of you secretly wish you were. Some of you hate yourselves because you can't seem to get a grip on food, sex, or your temper. Some of you are

recovering from physical or emotional abuse. Maybe you are tired of being single or tired of people classifying you by your relationship status. You could have been asked to leave a job you loved, or maybe you're stuck in a work environment with someone who makes your life miserable. Conflict between friends or family members might have worn you out. You could have an embarrassing disease you are trying to manage. Some of you are choking in financial debt that you are too humiliated to mention. *Abused. Cancer. Porn. Shame. Debt. Addict. Loneliness. My sexuality. Obesity. My mom. My son. HIV. Bankruptcy.* My guess is that some of those words could be your words too.

While shopping at Sam's Club recently, I passed a book written by a badger-grinning televangelist—a man who has made a fortune off promising a healthy, wealthy life to everybody who follows his advice. I needed coffee and was grumpier than normal, so I was punchy. *Stop lying to hurting people so you can sell those stupid books!* I thought.

Bad reaction, I know, but even on caffeinated days, religious teachers like that irk me. Sure, most of us are given some happy seasons of life, but what about the troubles that we would never choose for ourselves? It's easy to praise God some days, but other days, we cry out to him in pain. Doubts about God that we've never wanted to admit may rise to the surface, and we might not feel any sense of direction about what to do next. Some of us will make awful mistakes in this chaos, and the aftermath of our weakness will be troubling and painful. Flashing a big, cheesy smile during such times

would actually be more weird than holy, yet so many suffering believers feel pressured to grin and bear it. We don't realize that when the Bible asks us to "rejoice always,"<sup>2</sup> it isn't asking us for an exercise in artificiality.

Even in the midst of writing about peace and joy, Paul wanted to leave this earthly life to go be with Jesus. In fact, he wrote,

If I go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. So what shall I choose? I do not know. I am torn between the two. I desire to depart and be *with Christ*, which is far better indeed.<sup>3</sup>

Paul's use of the words *with Christ* clued me in to something big. His ache was relational, not just geographic. He didn't simply want to get to heaven; he wanted to get further up and further in to community with Jesus. Before catching that, I'd always felt sort of guilty for wanting to escape my earthly life to be closer to the Lord—after all, the Holy Spirit lived inside me. Why couldn't I just be content with what I had already been given? Yet, Paul understood the indwelling of the Holy Spirit better than you or I ever will, and he still longed to experience divine fellowship in a way that was more intimate than anything he could encounter on earth. His story helps me rejoice in all things while admitting the cramp in my side. It gives me permission to live a little homesick.

Paul and I aren't alone in longing for an escape hatch. Do you remember the scene from *The Lion, the Witch and*

*the Wardrobe* in which Aslan asks Lucy and Susan to walk with him before he faces execution? Lewis based this scene on a night when our Lord asked his closest human companions to stay awake with him during an hour of supreme struggle. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” said Jesus. “Stay here and keep watch with me.”<sup>4</sup> Three times Jesus asked his best human friends to watch with him, and three times those friends let him down. Our Lord wasn’t flashing a televangelist’s grin during this ordeal; he was alone and grieved to the point of sweating blood. So on those nights when you kneel in the silent dark to pray, wishing for the weight of a friend’s arm about your shoulders, you have a Savior who understands what it’s like to be without human companionship. Hebrews 4:15 says that “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” So Jesus knows what it means to feel alone. It’s shocking that a God would experience this for us; but he loved us enough to take on the troubles of our world.

A couple of months ago, a non-believing friend told me that he loves Greek mythology more than Old Testament stories because Greek gods and goddesses have human personality traits that make them relatable. Zeus is stormy. Hera is manipulative and difficult. Athena plays favorites.

“Holiness is too strange,” he said. “I don’t understand it. I don’t want to be close to a shapeless fire on a mountain.”

In this moment, I realized the relational importance of the incarnated Christ because in Jesus, we see a compression

of divine emotional complexity. In him, we find a fiery Lord who turns over tables in a temple, a tender Lord who weeps with the weeping, a gentle Lord who welcomes little children, a weary Lord who sleeps, and an introverted Lord who needs time alone.

We also find a Lord who sometimes wants to quit and go home. “Let this cup pass from me,”<sup>5</sup> he prayed—wishing for a way out that would not come. Here, Jesus gives us a beautiful example of authentic prayer—showing us that we don’t have to go skipping and grinning into every loss we face. We can cry out. We can weep. We can be honest with the Father about all of our feelings before we come at last to “Not my will, but thine.”<sup>6</sup> It’s okay for that process to be a monumental battle for us because it was a monumental battle for Jesus. You have a High Priest who is able to empathize. You can talk to him straight.

## Words. Presence. Hope.

In this book, I’m going to try to give you three gifts that I have needed during times of weariness. First, I want to offer you clear and strong *words* that describe painful experiences. Why? Because an accurate description of suffering can help us see its boundaries. To feel alone in the pitch dark with a dragon is terrifying—but if we can only light a match, if we can only catch a glimpse of the whole of a threat, we can usually begin to address that monster more strategically.

An accurate description of suffering can also enable us to

find the healing we need. When sorrow knocks us flat, it's hard to find the energy and focus required to unpack our own hearts. But if we can point to someone else's story, this can help us explain our burdens to friends and counselors. Perhaps this is part of the reason God gave us David's psalms: songs modeling honest pain and doubt. Instead of just praising God, David took time to explain his fear and sorrow with utter clarity, allowing readers to say, "Oh! Me too!" David showed us that he understood despair and loss, and this helps us trust him when he went on to claim that God had restored his soul. Without his raw insights on suffering and fear, his joy wouldn't ring as true—the inclusion of both helps us transition from paralysis to praise.

Second, I want to give you the *presence* of a friend who won't freak out about the magnitude of your exhaustion. I sit with you as one who understands weariness on a personal level. If you have failed during seasons of fatigue, know that I have too. During extreme stress, I've made some awful decisions, responding like an animal in pain. A few times, I was even willing to twist my theology to find some sort of relief. I wasn't as strong as I wanted to be, and sometimes those flashbacks of failure still hit me hard. "How could I have been so dense? Why didn't I see that coming? Why didn't I love God more? Why didn't I run away from sin, no matter how much it hurt to run into the dark?"

Yet these same terrible mistakes also showed me the depth of God's love. When he picked me up and carried me in grace, despite the mess I'd made of my faith, he demonstrated

a power that is made perfect in human weakness. I'd heard that premise all my life, but I had to see how little strength I had before I could understand how big his love really is. That experience has driven me to reach out to you, hoping and praying that I might be some sort of comfort in the midst of whatever trouble you are experiencing.

Sometimes I make jokes about my best friends being dead writers, but I really do love my favorite authors like family. Until I began writing this book for you, I didn't realize how Lewis, Chesterton, and Tolkien must have prayed for their readers—how they must have sat hunched over unfinished paragraphs, asking the Lord to give them precise words and images that would reach through space and time to fill real human hearts with courage and strength. One of the best parts of writing this book has been understanding how dearly those men must have loved me because now I know how much I've loved you.

So if you feel unseen right now, unwanted, rejected, lost—know that your pain has pulled me through long nights and early mornings of wrestling with these chapters. You are the reason I spent two of the hardest years of my life trying to find honest words for weary people. You are the reason I'm casting a trembling voice out into a critical world. You're worth that risk to me. Even while you've been hurting, I've been praying for you, and I'm praying for you still.

Third, I want to speak *hope* over you. I don't mean that I will give you easy answers, because (despite the movies) God doesn't always zap a long, hard struggle with tactile blessings.

Yet, the gospel can still refresh our vision in the midst of a difficult journey, filling our lungs with the atmosphere of heaven. It can place a clean, warm cloth on our eyes, fill our bellies with a hearty meal, and invite us to sing old hymns with fellow travelers who remind us why we are doing what we are doing.

These are my three goals for these pages. If you will go with me, I will try to help you look this world in the face, naming it, grieving over it, and finding our Jesus in the midst of it. Because I'm a fellow traveler (not an expert), this book of letters speaks from the middle of discovery, from the middle of a life that still sputters and fumbles. Some days my marriage is messed up. Some days I grieve over parenting mistakes that I would give anything to undo. Some days our finances stress me out. Some days I struggle with unforgiveness, fear, anger, and envy. Some days my theology is wonky. But God is working in my weakness, and he is working in yours. We don't have to be the heroes of our lives. He is.

In C. S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, young Lucy finds herself trapped inside a thick, enchanted darkness in which all nightmares come true. Overwhelmed by fear, she cries out to the great lion: "Aslan, Aslan, if ever you loved us at all, send us help now."<sup>7</sup>

At this moment of desperation, Lucy notices a light. She looks along its beam and sees something inside:

At first it looked like a cross, then it looked like  
an aeroplane, then it looked like a kite, and at last

with a whirring of wings it was right overhead and was an albatross. It circled three times round the mast and then perched for an instant on the crest of the gilded dragon at the prow. It called out in a strong sweet voice what seemed to be words though no one understood them. After that it spread its wings, rose, and began to fly slowly ahead, bearing a little to starboard. . . . No one except Lucy knew that as it circled the mast it had whispered to her, “Courage, dear heart,” and the voice, she felt sure, was Aslan’s, and with the voice a delicious smell breathed in her face.<sup>8</sup>

So courage, dear heart. I know you are tired. I know the darkness is thick and the way is longer and harder than you ever expected it to be. But God sees you, he hurts with you, and he welcomes your honesty. Even to the ends of the earth, he will lead you on.