# RACHEL WOJO

# one more ste o

Finding Strength
When You Feel Like Giving Up

## Praise for Rachel Wojo and One More Step

"In *One More Step*, Rachel Wojo gives permission to women all over the world to grieve, ache, and experience sadness while holding tight to their faith. It's refreshing to find a sister of the soul who doesn't offer platitudes but instead offers real life experience tangled in hope."

—Suzanne Eller, international speaker, blogger, and author of numerous books including *The Mended Heart* 

"We've all had situations in our lives where we just couldn't see how we'd make it through another day. With this book, you'll be encouraged and lifted up by Rachel, a friend who understands how to seek God's strength and healing in the midst of the pain!"

—Lysa TerKeurst, *New York Times* best-selling author and president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

"This book is both personal and practical. Like our heavenly Father, Rachel is fluent in the language of pain. Anyone who has struggled or is struggling will find healing and hope on each page."

—Jon Weece, senior pastor and lead follower at Southland Christian Church in Lexington, Kentucky, and author of *Jesus Prom* 

"When you sit across from Rachel in real life and look in her eyes, you see a woman who wants nothing more than to please and know Jesus and give him away. Her passion for God is as contagious as it is sincere and no doubt built from much time in the trenches of suffering with him."

—Jennie Allen, founder and CEO of IF: Gathering, and author of *Restless* and *Anything* 

"If your life circumstances have ever left you full of fear, dread, or worry, then this book is for you. Rachel is the friend who has been through life's cruel wringer and knows exactly how you feel. She gently shows you how to let God pull you out of the muck of life and point you back in the

right—and righteous—direction. Encouraging and practical. This will be my new go-to book for hurting friends."

—Karen Ehman, *New York Times* best-selling author and Proverbs 31 Ministries speaker

"Just when you think you can't go on, a friend who's been there offers you her hand. Rachel Wojo is a rare, beautiful writer who gets to the heart of the matter. In *One More Step*, Rachel writes honestly about pain but points to the beauty God wants to bring out of the broken places in our lives."

—Joanna Weaver, author of *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World* 

"Rachel Wojo's personal journey, insights from her walk with Jesus, and hope-filled words make *One More Step* an encouraging guide for every heart when life's path gets rough."

—Holley Gerth, best-selling author of You're Going to Be Okay and What Your Heart Needs for the Hard Days

"Where do you turn when life simply feels too difficult to even keep going? Told with both wisdom and honesty, Rachel's story is equal parts heart-wrenching and encouraging. In the end, she offers a strong dose of hope for the hopeless and the strength to take just one more step."

—Ruth Soukup, New York Times best-selling author of Living Well, Spending Less

"With down-to-earth honesty and soul-stirring inspiration, Rachel Wojo points our hearts toward lasting hope. She not only shares biblical truths we need to hear but shows us how to intentionally hold onto God's promises so we can walk confidently in his plans, no matter how hard life gets!"

—Renee Swope, best-selling author of *A Confident Heart* and radio co-host of Proverbs 31 Ministries' *Everyday Life with Lysa & Renee* 

"Rachel combines powerful biblical truth with very real everyday life. If you're looking for help to simply take the next step, you will find it here."

—Sheila Walsh, author of Five Minutes with Jesus

one more step

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#### Mom,

You took me to the library every week, bought books for me as gifts upon my request, and fostered a love for reading and writing.

That was only the beginning.

Can't wait to see you again.

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Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

-Galatians 6:9



#### Permission to Ache Freely

That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed his own blood for my soul.

-Horatio G. Spafford

ension forced an ache into my entire body as I curled into a tight ball on the bed. Mounting circumstances seemed too much for my mind to continue functioning, and unfathomable stress choked every inch of my being. Every cell throbbed, pressing in my eyelids and numbing my lips.

I had stood at my mother's graveside three weeks ago. Shouldn't the overwhelming grief subside soon? How could sorrow envelop someone to the point of being unable to perform simple tasks? I used every ounce of strength I possessed merely to get out of bed. I felt panicked by everyday tasks of preparing for work and caring for my family.

The personal life storms I had endured for months relentlessly flooded my mind. On top of my mother's death, other difficult circumstances had crashed over me for the last fourteen months. I didn't think I would be able to continue to hold up; it was all too much.

No tears remained to trace their familiar path down my cheeks, but I sobbed on without them. Life hadn't always been this difficult.

As a child, I never experienced severe personal failure. I grew up in a

wonderful Christian home, and my parents ensured that our family was faithful to church. I attended Christian school and then Christian college. And after I graduated, I completed the cycle of Christian education by teaching in a Christian school. My future husband was a "preacher boy," and when we married, the plan was that he would take a youth pastor position wherever God led.

Life as an adult offered a wonderful beginning, full of glorious hopes and beautiful dreams. But I soon discovered that no one is exempt from problems, and my perfect beginning didn't last long. Things changed drastically in a few short years. I found myself in a place I never dreamed I would be—divorced and a single mom of a child with special needs. Every day for months I felt as though I walked in a fog.

In the midst of my painful circumstances, I still had to maintain a house, care for my little girl, and work a full-time job. I had to figure out details, like how to pay for childcare and which facility could best care for my daughter while I was at work. We lived on a very tight budget, yet I still couldn't pay all the bills.

It seemed that people at church weren't quite sure how to handle my divorce, and shame cloaked my soul as I felt their disappointment. Maybe folks didn't know what to say to me at church, but I sensed that they gossiped behind my back. I chose to find a new church and even new friends. And I began to rethink my purpose in life and redefine my faith. I questioned what I was living for. What did God want to do with a divorced single mom of a child with special needs?

Three weeks after I said good-bye to my mom, I felt as if the world was spinning but I wasn't physically dizzy. Have you ever been there? When the storm in your heart transfers itself to your head and nothing in life makes sense? I know you have.

Every person on earth experiences difficult times at some point or another in this journey called life. Sometimes the difficulties simply add up. Two plus two equals four and before you can blink, a pile of problems results. Other times, the difficulties expand far faster than addition problems. Suddenly, the issues seem to multiply exponentially. Before you know it, the feeling of wanting to give up has saturated your spirit and you feel like you can't take even one more step. You have lost every ounce of strength in your mind, body, and spirit.

Whether it's unemployment, loss, unfulfilled dreams, marital issues, financial struggles, infertility, family heartaches, or disease, the list can go on and on. The issues often lead to the same feeling-wanting to quit. Stop trying. Stop pursuing. Stop everything.

No one begins a journey in hopes it will end before they get too far down the path. The roads of life don't begin with detour signs, and people don't start with the feeling of wanting to give up. Not one person sets goals because she wants to fail. The beginning of a journey usually appears to be streamlined. We calculate the route from point A to point B and draw plans to connect our dreams with real life. We want to finish strong, but circumstances creep in, people change, and negative feelings emerge.

#### I Thought No Crying Was Allowed

When I first began to experience extremely difficult life circumstances, like disaster, divorce, disease, and death, I started to read the book of Psalms on a regular basis. You may know that many of the psalms are songs of praise and adoration: Praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord. Praise him in the heavens; praise him in the heights . . . These were the psalms I memorized in Christian school and church. They are good and holy and honorable. They resound with the goodness of God and his glory. The psalms give people a sense of joy and peace, right? Surely their inclusion in the Bible was intended to help us praise the Lord, and to think otherwise would be theologically unsound, am I right? Oh, I was so wrong about this.

In all my years of growing up in God's Word, I don't remember ever reading Psalm 88. This particular psalm certainly wasn't one on the Christian education memorization list. And I sure wish it would have been.

O LORD, God of my salvation;
I cry out day and night before you.
Let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry!

For my soul is full of troubles,
 and my life draws near to Sheol.

I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
 I am a man who has no strength,

like one set loose among the dead,
 like the slain that lie in the grave,

like those whom you remember no more,
 for they are cut off from your hand.

You have put me in the depths of the pit,
 in the regions dark and deep.

Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
 and you overwhelm me with all your waves. (verses 1–7)

Right in the middle of the book of Psalms, my soul awoke to a different tune than I had anticipated in this epic musical collection. That day was a new one for me, all because I discovered that the Bible actually contains a sad song. Not just any sad song, but a song that seemed as though I could have penned it. The entire melancholy psalm contained no praise, only heartache. The psalmist's expression leaked desperation and depression; he oozed sorrow over uncontrollable circumstances.

Could it be that God placed this sad song in the middle of the Bible to let people like me know that it's okay to ache with the sadness and hardness of this world? That it's good to let God know we're struggling and can't understand why the pit is so deep? That we don't have to pretend everything is perfect all the time and it's okay to express negative emotions?

As a child, I experienced difficulty in expressing myself, especially when things happened outside of my control. Melancholy was my middle name. When my passionate spirit once exhibited itself, one of my pastors declared, "Rachel, you're like the little girl with the little curl. When she was good, she was very good. And when she was bad, she was horrid." I never forgot his words because I didn't want to be horrid. I just didn't know how to express what I was feeling. Once I did begin to express any negative feelings, I felt that my expressions were frowned on. Psalm 88 seemed to be a psalm written just for me—the girl who desperately wanted to be good but often felt horrid, even with Jesus living in her heart.

This psalm echoed much of my heart's cry. God, I need you. I need you to tell me why all these things are happening to me and why I have to go through these burdens. I feel like I'm in hell, Lord. Take me out of this crazy mind-set and wild circumstances.

#### The First Step Out of the Pit

Psalm 88 beautifully informs us that God longs to listen to our sad songs. He wants to hear our hearts cry out to him, even when we don't understand his plan or are missing the lessons he wants to teach us. He loves to listen to our needs, and it's all right to tell him, Yes, Lord, I'm overwhelmed. Help me, Jesus, please. Do you even remember me? Because all these situations I'm encountering are killing me. I need you, Jesus. When we arrive at this point, we're in a good place.

Recognizing we want to give up is the first step toward realizing the pit we're in. Once we recognize that God wants to hear our cries, we can start to work our way through the feelings of despair. The psalmist continued to process his emotions:

You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a horror to them.

I am shut in so that I cannot escape;
my eye grows dim through sorrow.

Every day I call upon you, O LORD;
I spread out my hands to you.

Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the departed rise up to praise you?

Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,
or your faithfulness in Abaddon?

Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

But I, O LORD, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. (verses 8–13)

The psalmist had lost friends because of his depressed state of mind. He couldn't see anything and he begged God to take him out of the dark. He'd lost the ability to see God's faithfulness and he'd forgotten how good God really is. He didn't know what else to do but pray.

Have you ached with the sadness of crushing life circumstances? Have your friends left you high and dry because they don't know how to cope with your pain? Have you felt that you can barely force the words through your mind even to talk to God? Besides losing friends, you feel like you don't know where God is either.

My heart aches for you; I can relate to that feeling. The psalmist felt this way too.

O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness. (verses 14-18)

Perhaps you too have wondered, God, why? Why do I have to live through all these problems? Why are you doing this to me? Everyone hates me; my spouse thinks I'm crazy and my friends have all ditched me. How can I see you through this darkness? Isn't it interesting that this is where the sad song of Psalm 88 ends? The psalmist offered no resounding praise to the Lord for delivery from the pit. There was no hoopla or grand finale of joyful feelings over being restored. The psalmist didn't end with a glorious resolution to his emotional turmoil.

Psalm 88 is a beautiful gift to us—one that we both need and crave. God loves us so much that he gives us the permission to ache freely. What a gift! He's saying it's really okay to let him know about our bad days and the feelings we experience over horrible circumstances.

God would rather hear about your bad day than not hear from you at all. It's okay to tell him that we aren't loving life and that this current daily grind leaves us feeling unsatisfied and disheartened. He wants us to tell him when our hearts are heavy and hurting just as much as he wants us to tell him when we're happy and thankful. That's how much he loves us.

#### **Choosing Prayer over Panic**

In spite of all the negative emotion the psalmist expressed in his melancholy song of honesty, his word choices reveal positive points as well. In verse 1, he addressed God as the "God of my salvation." The psalmist knew God personally, but he was fighting a battle of will and emotion. I'm quite familiar with this battle and I'm sure you are too. It's the fight of what we choose to do with our feelings. We can't always control how we feel about an issue, but we can choose how we respond to those feelings. We can choose to channel the feelings in the right direction. This was the psalmist's challenge.

The psalmist also stated his cry was continuous, "day and night." The writer was a prayer warrior who believed in the power of continual honest expression before a holy God. He acknowledged that prayer was his lifeline

What can we learn from his example? Prayer itself is a reminder of how good God is. The opportunity to communicate directly with the Creator of the universe is a gift of grace. God loves to hear our prayers, no matter our word choice. This psalm is proof. So when we experience feelings of desperation and we're tempted to plunge into despair, we must remember to pray before any other action.

#### Prayer trumps panic. Every. Time.

Not only was the psalmist panicked, but repetition indicates the depth of his despair. By the time we arrive at verse 9, the writer has repeated "every day I call upon you." He wasn't experiencing these issues for the first time. His battle had been ongoing. His lips expressed the same sorrow one more time, hoping for relief, though none was in sight.

In the same breath, the psalmist held his hands wide open, palms up, and remembered that he had surrendered everything. He'd given it all to the Lord; he wasn't holding tight to anything. And yet complaints and sorrow continued to pour from his soul for the remainder of the psalm.

Through the inclusion of this sad song in the middle of praise songs galore, I felt as though I had discovered a glorious character trait of God.

God understands human emotion because he created human emotion; you will never experience an emotion that he doesn't understand.

God understands our need to express feelings. He doesn't need me to wear a mood ring so he can determine what I'm feeling. He knows exactly when I feel like giving up. He knows exactly when you feel like giving up. God will not change if we are sad and depressed. He is forever the same and he loves us no matter the feelings we experience. He also understands how much we need someone to listen, and he is there for us, always the willing listener. He has promised never to leave us alone, and his promises never fail (see Deuteronomy 7:9).

#### It's More Than Okay to Cry

In spite of all the pain and loss of the "perfect" life, God uniquely and graciously brought Matthew into my life and we eventually married. Over the past fifteen years God has abundantly blessed us with a wonderful story of grace and redemption. Our blended family consists of each of our girls plus five more sweet children.

Only two months after Matt and I married, while we were still in the midst of adjusting to our new life together, my dear mom lost her battle with leukemia and went to heaven

That day I described at the beginning of the chapter, when I could only lie on the bed and grieve, the bedroom door creaked open. Matt walked in the room and sat beside me. His words stumbled over each other as he felt my pain, and he spoke softly in his deep voice, "I don't know what to do to help you. But this helped me when I was in an extremely hard place." He rested his open Bible on the pillow beside me, and after holding me for a few minutes, he left the room.

He didn't tell me to stop crying. He didn't tell me I should be over the hurt by now. He gently let me know that he wanted to help but didn't know what to do. Mostly he gave me a huge gift: he pointed me to the One who invites us to pour out our hearts before him (see Psalm 62:8).

Life is messy and full of surprises. I know you know that. As you work your way through this book, you'll find that there's no judgment here for your hurting heart. In this first chapter, I want to give you the same gift God gives us through this beautiful psalm. The gift?

The permission to ache freely.

Finding strength begins with honesty with God. You don't have to sit high on the mountain of victory or even imagine you are sitting high on that mountain. I'm not going to ask you to dream of the finish line medal or think about how good it is going to feel once you get through the valley. We're not going to chat about lofty goals or unfathomable aspirations.

I've been through divorce. I've faced the death of my mama. I'm holding the hand of a special-needs child who suffers daily. I know what it's like to stare at disaster and feel desperation. There are no shortcuts. I found that I can best walk the path of life when I do it one step at a time. And that's what we're going to do together.

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We are going to find the strength to take one more step when we feel like giving up.
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#### Pillars of Truth to Lean On

At the end of each chapter, you will find pillars of truth for the journey. I'll share the Bible verses that I've depended on in order to make it one more step. You can use these verses to focus your heart and mind on the truth of God's Word and know that he is with you every step of the way. So lean on these verses to help you remember that God longs to hear you pray, regardless of how you feel.

- Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; hold not your peace at my tears! (Psalm 39:12)
- Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. (Psalm 62:8)
- I cry to you, O LORD; I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living." (Psalm 142:5)
- · The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. (Psalm 145:18)

#### Stepping Stone #1

Welcome to the first stepping stone of One More Step! Together we are going to take small steps at the end of each chapter to help us practically apply the material covered. You can use a blank journal of your own or download a free. beautiful One More Step printable companion journal. (Just go to http://rachelwojo.com/onemorestep.)

Recognizing you want to give up is the first step to finding true strength. Now that we recognize that the search for strength begins with God, pray and tell God everything on your heart. When you feel ready, challenge yourself by writing a prayer or letter to God, expressing all your frustrations and pain. Be completely open and honest. Congratulations! This stepping stone is your first prayer journal entry.



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