

A FIELD GUIDE FOR MEN

Coming Home

For the man the war followed home

Jake McCluskey

You made it back. The plane landed, the boots came off, and everybody around you acted like that was the end of it. Welcome home, hug your wife, get a job, get on with it.

Nobody told you the truth: for a lot of men, coming home is the harder tour. Over there, you knew who the enemy was. You had a mission, a team, a reason to get up. Back here, the mission's gone, the team's scattered across four states, and the enemy might be the guy at Walmart who lets a cart door slam and puts you flat on the floor with your heart trying to climb out of your chest.

I served in the Navy. I never went to war, and I'm not going to sit here and pretend I know the weight of what you're carrying. What I do know is what it looks like when a man is drowning quiet, smiling in the driveway and dying on the inside, because I've watched it, and I've written to enough of you to know the shape of it. So I'm not writing this as a guy who's been where you've been. I'm writing it because somebody needs to say some true things to you plainly, and nobody else is going to.

1. There are two wounds here, and they are not the same wound

Most people, even well-meaning people, throw everything you're carrying into one bag and call it "PTSD." That's lazy, and it costs you, because the two things eating at you need different words and different care.

PTSD is your body still fighting a war that already ended. The flinch at the slammed door. The nightmares. Sleeping with your back to the wall. Scanning every room you walk into like it might still kill you. That's not weakness and it's not "in your head." That's a nervous system that got trained hard in a place where hypervigilance kept you alive, and it hasn't gotten the memo that you're home now.

Moral injury is a different animal. That's your conscience carrying something you did, something you saw, or something you couldn't stop. It isn't your heart rate spiking at a loud noise. For a lot of men it's the quiet voice at 2 a.m., the one that says you're not the man people think you are, that if they knew what you know about yourself, they'd walk away.

Some of you have one. A lot of you have both. Either way, name them separately. A man numbing a nightmare doesn't need the same thing as a man who thinks he's unforgivable. Lump them together and you'll keep reaching for the wrong tool.

2. This is not a faith problem

Somewhere along the way you got the message, maybe nobody said it out loud, that if your faith were strong enough, you wouldn't still be waking up in a sweat, you wouldn't still hear that door close behind you every time you shut your eyes. That message is a lie, and I want to kill it right here before we go any further.

A man can love God with everything in him and still wake up on the floor with his heart pounding. A man can believe every word of Scripture and still carry a shame that won't sit still. Job loved God and still sat in ashes scraping his skin with a piece of pottery. David was called a man after God's own heart and still wrote psalms that sound like a man coming apart at the seams. Faith was never a shield that keeps the wound from happening. It's what carries you through it.

3. "Pray harder" is a lie, and it's the wrong lie

Somebody's going to tell you, maybe already has, that if you just prayed more, read your Bible more, had more faith, this would lift. Brother, that's not counsel. That's a man who doesn't know what to do with your pain, handing you a job so he doesn't have to sit in it with you.

PTSD is not a prayer deficiency. Moral injury is not a devotion problem. Your nervous system doesn't reset because you memorized another verse, and your conscience doesn't clear because you prayed longer than yesterday. Prayer matters. It is not a substitute for treatment, any more than prayer is a substitute for a cast on a broken arm. God gave you a body and a mind that both need real care, and going to get that care is not a failure to trust Him. It's stewardship of what He gave you.

4. You're allowed to lament. The Bible expects it.

You don't have to walk into this with your jaw set and your voice steady. A third of the Psalms are complaints, men crying out that this is too much, that God feels far away, that they don't understand why they're still carrying what they're carrying.

"The LORD is near to the brokenhearted And saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18). Read that again. Near to the brokenhearted, not disappointed in him. Saves the crushed, doesn't scold him for being crushed.

Don't rush past this part. Don't grab the first verse you can find and use it to skip the grief. Sit in it. Say the true thing out loud, to God, even if the true thing is "I don't know if I can do this." That's not weak faith. That's the most honest prayer there is.

5. If you think you're unforgivable, look at the cross again

Some of you aren't wrestling with fear. You're wrestling with guilt, real guilt, over something you did or didn't do, something that sits in you like a stone. You've decided you're past forgiving. You've decided God is done with you.

I'm not going to talk you out of the weight of what you did. I'm not going to tell you it wasn't that bad, because I don't know what it was, and cheapening it would be its own kind of insult

to you. What I'll tell you is where that weight actually went.

"But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). That's not a metaphor for feeling a little better. That's a real man, on a real cross, carrying your real guilt in His actual body. Not reframed. Not explained away. Carried.

Paul wrote to a young pastor and called himself, plainly, one "among whom I am foremost of all" (1 Timothy 1:15). This is the man who cast his vote to have believers put to death before Christ got hold of him. He didn't say "I used to be the foremost of sinners." He said it as a man still standing in the wonder of it, because grace doesn't require you to feel clean enough to qualify for it.

"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Now. Not once you've made up for it. Not once you've forgiven yourself. Now. That's not a verdict you earn your way into either. It's for the man who has put his trust in what Christ did on that cross, and that door is open to you right now, today, whatever you've done. Once you're in, your standing with God was never held up by your own strength to begin with, so it isn't broken by your worst day.

6. Getting help is not weakness. It's what a smart man does.

Calling the VA, sitting down with a counselor, telling a chaplain what you actually saw, going to your elders and saying "I'm not okay." None of that is a white flag. A man who won't call in support when he's taking fire isn't brave. He's about to get somebody killed, maybe himself. The same is true here.

You wouldn't tell a man with a shattered leg to just pray harder and walk it off. Your mind and your conscience deserve the same respect you'd give a broken bone. Go get the care. Tell somebody the whole truth, not the version that makes you look fine. That's not you failing God. That's you using the help He put in front of you.

7. If you're thinking about ending it, stop and make this call first

If you are thinking about ending your life, reach out now. Veterans Crisis Line: dial 988 then press 1, or text 838255. You do not have to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to connect. Or call or text 988, any time.

Do that before you do anything else today. Everything else in this guide can wait. That call can't.

8. God is not finished with you

You might be reading this convinced that the man you were before is gone, and the man you are now isn't worth much. I'd tell you straight to your face that you're wrong about that.

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). He didn't say come to Me once you've got it together. He said come weary. Come heavy-laden. That's an invitation built for exactly where you are right now, not for the man you're hoping to become someday. He doesn't leave you there either. The rest He gives comes with a yoke, His yoke, meaning you walk from here with Him, not alone.

You are not a problem God is managing from a distance. You are a man He is not finished with.

One inch at a time, brother. That's how this goes.

The verses to have ready

- **Psalm 34:18** "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted And saves those who are crushed in spirit."
- **Isaiah 53:5** "But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed."
- **Romans 8:1** "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."
- **1 Timothy 1:15** "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all."
- **Matthew 11:28** "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."

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