

Chapter Six
What Alone Means

“Forty-eight hours.” Seth says, after looking on the computer on the second office’s desk.

I assume this is a measure of time. Seth looks up into the air to count another measure. Then he nods his head and says something I understand fully.

“S’go Willow.”

Seth does not like to talk to other people. But talks freely to me, and even practices what he’ll say to other people and I will listen. This is what he is doing on the way to wherever it is the little screen is telling us to go.

“They’ve been missing fifty-five hours. I called them twenty-seven times. Dad always answers...”

I wish Seth had told me I’d be alone in the car for more measures of time. But Seth always cracks the window and I enjoy the way the people smile at me when they pass the car. Even the ones that dress alike with shiny things on their alike shirts. When Seth returns, he tells me what happened inside.

“They are starting their search tomorrow. If the weekend comes before they find them, we will go help them, Willow. They might not know where to look.”

Later today, the man comes to the house that usually just joins Dad in his office. They call him a lawyer, but Seth says he is more like an Uncle, whatever that is. Today the lawyer does not go into the office with Dad. Dad is away. The lawyer, Mr. Billings, Seth calls him, follows Seth to where the next section of fence is being completed.

“Is this like them, Seth? Not calling? It doesn’t seem like your Dad at all.”

“They always call. Mom gets concerned.”

“I figured as much. I don’t mean to upset you, but I went ahead and pulled a copy of your Dad’s Last Will and Testament just in case this doesn’t turn out well. I want us to be as ready as possible. Would you like to hear what I found out thus far?”

“Yes, please, Mr. Billings.” Seth pours cement.

“First of all, are you sixteen?” Mr. Billings bends and shuffles papers against his legs in a file, making sure the summer breeze does not carry the papers away.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Your father requested that you be considered an emancipated minor should anything happen. I guess there aren’t any suitable relatives to take you in. It looks like he asked me to look in on you as well. Does that seem alright? Betty and I would be fine taking you. He may have written this before they diagnosed the, uh...what is it?”

“Depends on the doctor you ask. But Asperger’s Syndrome used to be the consensus.”

“Right. You seem to be doing fine on your own, I just thought I’d ask.”

“I have Jesus. I have Willow. I’m not alone.”

“Right. Right. I understand.” More paper shuffling. “Your Dad also left you the entire estate, should something happen. You’d also have charge over all his accounts and... the entire company. He seems to have a lot of faith in you, Seth. I’m just wondering what a 16-year-old would do with a multi-million dollar construction company and a 14,000 square foot house. With a guest house, six car garage, and a *chapel* might I add? It looks like your parents live debt free. So we’d just need to transfer the deed.”

“The 14,000 *includes* the guest house and the chapel. Dad said to trust the board, but verify where necessary. You and the rest of the board will call for hard questions. I will answer. I will do more when high school is done.”

“Understood.” But no one really understands Seth, so I know he’s lying. Mr. Billings makes a noise in his throat before he closes the folder of papers. “Seth, your Dad let me know about the situation with your girlfriend. Your Dad wants you to have a say. I’m willing to do whatever it takes to -”

“I want what Natalie wants. Natalie doesn’t want the baby or any others...or me. Please don’t ask about that again.” Now Seth is rubbing his hands on his pants.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” says Mr. Billings, with sadness in his voice. “What I *will* do is look into this couple that’s adopting the kid. I’ll make sure all the paperwork is in order so that we don’t find ourselves in the gray legally. Is that alright?”

“Yes, sir.” Seth does not like to live in the gray, especially now.

“It’s possible, Seth, that you’ve been dealt quite a tough hand all at once. Do you think you can handle it?”

“No.” Seth is honest. “But God handles my life for me now, completely.”

Seth packed tents and a big plastic container of food and water for the trip to the mountains in the car. The air up in the mountains smells sweeter. Wilder. Seth smells it too, because he opens the windows so we can both smell it when we drive.

But on the breezy mountain drive, I’m nearly startled out one of the windows. Seth’s eyes are on the road. And he doesn’t even squint at the glowing Man suddenly sitting on the seat between us. I nearly cry out a warning until the Man speaks.

“Peace, Willow.” The words are not just for my ears. They move through me, leading me to a peace greater than even the wild mountain air had been providing. Almost to sleepiness if I weren’t so eagerly wondering about this Man. He doesn’t leave me to wonder long.

“Remarkable boy, isn’t he? They only see the broken vessel. I knew it’d take a dog to see deeper. He is important. They are all important. Therefore your life will be healthy and long, Willow. All you need to do is what they ask. There will be times they will ask things greater than even your keen senses and obedience can overcome. But I have already overcome those things. Step lightly, Willow, when the rocks are loose.”

The Man goes again. Not in a flash. But simply out of my sight, as if He always was and still is there, just hidden. His words enter into my memory, into my very will. Placing health in my

bones. I do not understand much of what He says. Who are *'they'*? When are rocks loose? What is *'remarkable'*? But I am also assured that I will understand later. Leaving questions to the free will of the people.

If I could imagine someone bright enough and good enough to be their God, I'd have imagined this Man. Only I guess I thought He'd be bigger. But who is to say that Someone big enough to make the mountains isn't also good enough to fit inside Seth's truck?

Seth makes sure to stay in a place where he has "bars" on his phone. But far enough away so that we must pitch a tent to be safe at night. Now, after the tent is up and we share a sandwich, Seth wants to use the rest of the daylight. He had done something strange before we left. He had gone into the laundry room and picked out the smelliest shirts he could find for each of his parents. I didn't understand why until just now.

He retrieves the two shirts and a long leash. Puts the leash on me. Then makes a clear instruction as he shoves the shirts into my nose.

"Go find 'em, girl."

I didn't need to be reminded of what Mom and Dad smell like. But the last sniff keeps me focused enough to catch a phantom whiff on the wind. I stand a moment, trying to trace the source. The breeze gets still, and before it can start again and take the scent away, I'm pulling Seth's strength behind me, forcing him to run what he says is a mile to an empty camp site.

The site is covered in their things. Shoes with chew marks from less obedient days. A scarf Mom wears when there is a chill in the breeze. Seth mentions that it looks like they had packed the truck and left just a few things out at the camp site. The fire is cold and dry. But just when Seth wonders, I catch a trace on the ground that reminds me of Dad. We follow this along a path for half the distance it took to get from our campsite to theirs.

I whimper when the path slides my paw aside, nearly causing me a tumble. *Step lightly when the rocks are loose.* Seth makes a similar sound when he must stabilize himself after running into my tail at a complete halt. He is questioning my tread, which in a person would be a tiptoe. But in a few feet we both see that if we had not stepped lightly, we'd be tumbling, not peering, fifty feet down a recent rockslide into a ravine.

His eyes are trained to know them. My nose is the same. All senses are telling us both that the man holding the woman in the ravine is Dad with Mom.

Once when I was a puppy, a tiny mouse made the mistake of stepping in the path of a horse. At least, that is what Pete had said. It had gotten caked inside dirt against the foot of the horse until we had all smelled it, even the people. The breeze aside, that ravine smells a little like Mom and like Dad. But a lot like that dead mouse on that hoof. I look up to see that Seth is looking at his phone.

"Thank you, Lord. Two bars should be plenty." Then he dials a number. "Mr. Billings? We found them...no, I don't think so. We are going down to check."

Seth is cautious, and walks down the long way, leaving his phone on the path with some invisible beacon Mr. Billings says he will tell them to find. We assume the rockslide occurred just as Mom had walked by. Dad had likely not received a warning about loose rocks when seeking

her later. Mom is crushed beneath a boulder at her waist. Dad's legs seem out of sorts. Neither one could have gotten out for help. So they held one another until they likely succumbed to these wounds and the chill of night.

Some persons hear the word they say about Seth and think he doesn't feel or love. Perhaps the only two people that really understood how wrong that is are clinging to one another in death as they did in life. And Seth is crying. I am holding him, because I know we're alone now. Well, besides the Man holding us both. I don't see Him. But my eyes are not all I trust.

By the time the people with the vehicles and bags and uniforms arrive, Seth is all out of tears, leaving them to assume that he never cried them at all. But since we are alone together now, I suppose I'm the only one that needs to know.

He has them turned to ash and placed deep in the ground at the last section of fence he built before we found them. A carved stone a memorial in our own yard. Seth had not wanted them in some far away cemetery.

Seth rises each morning at six without an alarm. Only some driving force in him to greet morning. He sits at the breakfast bar alone. And eats a bowl of some light colored cereal with milk and a spoon, like always. Then, at first, he returns to his bed.

He will cry and punch things. Break things. Always alone. No one to comfort or heal him except me. He clutches my fur at night alone in this massive house that smells of them. I don't do the things he does, but I feel the way he feels. I hate and despair. There is nothing but this forever without Mom or Dad or Natalie. No stitch for a wound like this. Not even the six a.m. cereal or the persistent building of a snow fence.

Mr. Billings says the board is taking care of things for a while. Until Seth feels like he can fill big shoes. Seth tells Mr. Billings that word Natalie would say. "Never". But Mr. Billings waits. Doesn't come by. I think he just stays away with his body, though. I think he talks to God about Seth. Because slowly, something changes.

One morning, Seth has an idea. It is after the night I groggily see that Man again, touching his chest and his head. Seth rises at six, bitter and alone and hating. And finds a book on a shelf in his father's office. Over his cereal today, he cries, gritted teeth. Reading aloud as if forced to by threat of death this day in July.

"Psalm one. *'Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful;'*" Then he stops. Sniffles. "Scornful...scornful."

Seth rises, walking back to his father's office and retrieving another book from the walls lined with them. He returns and speaks aloud again after looking in a few places. "That means hateful, Willow. Hate. Hate is a sin...'*But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.*'"

Seth is taken aback. Convicted. But loved. But how so when alone? He reads aloud again. Almost as though he's lulling himself. Like a child. "*He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper.*" Then Seth cries again. And if I didn't know he'd lost everything in life worth having, I'd think he's smiling a little as he closes first his nonsensical book, then his wet eyes.

“God... I don’t know why I have to be alive now. But since I am... Help me...help me live.”
And then I’m sure that even though he’s crying...Seth smiles.

He doesn’t go back to bed today. He spends the morning looking through every inch of every drawer and shelf and wall of his father’s office. Learning it. He is overwhelmed today. Discouraged. But day by day, he has cereal and a Psalm at six. And day by day, I think Seth starts to breathe a little easier. Get angry less. He even begins school on schedule. Comes home and works in his father’s office. Knowing it. Feeling it. Accepting phone calls. Working and prospering through the grief.

It is December. Early December, because Seth told me so. When he opens his eyes this morning and looks different. He sees the sun streaming in. The snow falling outside. And instead of forcing the smiles. The work and the knowing. He awakens with it. Aside from cereal and fence construction. Despite a broken heart. Grief. Stress. Burdens. He opens his eyes today and smiles. Breathes like breath is new. Then whispers.

“*Let everything that has breath praise the Lord*’That means us, Willow. Us too.”

Sample #3 – A Question I Answered for GotQuestions.org

Question: I have a question with several parts: What does God want for black culture? Can God remove crime from black culture? What can Christians do in a world where self-segregation and racism looks safer than trying to get along? What does the Bible say about self-segregation and "the bounds between the nations"?

Answer:

Even many decades post-civil rights, race still seems to be a great source of division in America today. However, the Bible teaches us another truth. The only truth- which provides a Way for us to rise above our differences.

What does God want for black culture?

“And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.” Acts 17:26-27

While we are told that God Himself set the boundaries between nations, it is important to remember that what God wants for one culture, He wants for all cultures. We all descended from the same bloodline, and God’s ultimate purpose for *every* culture is that we find our way back to Him. More specifically, Jesus gave us two commands to follow.

“Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and Prophets.” Matthew 22:37-40

Ultimately, God wants man to love Him, and He wants us to love one another. Everything He wants for and from us revolves around those truths. Knowing then, that our ultimate purpose as humans is to find Him and love Him, what does that mean for black culture?

Well, God wants the black community to grope for Him and find Him. All men as individuals, regardless of color or culture must turn from their sin and accept Christ as Savior. An entire culture doing so is absolutely God’s heart.

“The Lord is... not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” 2 Peter 3:9

Crime in black culture

While God “can” do anything (Luke 1:37), crime does not come from His heart, and thus it is not His to stop. As I mentioned in that verse from 2 Peter, anything resembling crime or violence is not His wish for us. But when given an absolute paradise, the first two human beings chose to sin, even knowing it would lead to death. (Genesis 3). We were given the “gift” of free

will, so that we could choose God – grope for Him. He didn't want mindless followers. He wanted us to choose Him. We *chose* sin, and because of that, we are *all* sinners. (Romans 3:23).

Unfortunately, our tendency to choose sin over God has played out in countless horrific ways throughout the history of the world. This includes crime in the black community. If we were to obey those two commandments back in Matthew 22 (Love God, love others), crime would not exist. One cannot properly love God and others and then commit a crime against one of His children. The solution for every evil in this world is to love God and love others. If crime occurs, it is because one simply did not choose God's way. This is true in any culture.

Self-segregation vs. Unity in Christ

Self-segregation is essentially the practice of separation of a religious or ethnic group (sect) from the rest of society by the group itself. The Bible has a similar term, and it is called *sectarianism*. The Bible tells us that this practice is wrong. Just before this next verse in some versions of the Bible, this section is titled "Sectarianism is Sin".

"Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgement." 1 Corinthians 1:10

One might argue that this concept doesn't apply to race, but it does. Any perceived differences are all negated at the cross of Christ. Many are mentioned here:

"...there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarianⁱ, Scythianⁱⁱ, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all." Colossians 3:11

Therefore, any division within the body of Christ is repeatedly discouraged throughout the New Testament. As Christians, we must strive wholeheartedly for unity within the church. Yes, it is easy to self-segregate. But it is absolutely against God's heart for His church. As we are one with Christ, we must also be in unity with one another.

"I...beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." Ephesians 4:1-6

Boundaries

My favorite example of God breaking down boundaries between cultures with the unity of Christ is the Biblical account of the woman at the well (see John 4). In Jesus' day, the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans. However, Jesus chose to go out of His way to speak to a Samaritan woman, one who was not even accepted by her own people. He revealed Himself to her as the Messiah. When Jesus did something, it meant something. His love. His sacrifice. Was meant for everyone. Not only that, but we must not refuse to have dealings with anyone that can be reached for Christ, even across cultures.

Another example is part of my own testimony, when I choose to mention it. I am wholly accepted by a loving God. And I'm black. *And* white. Self-segregation is not only something I don't choose. It is something I *cannot* choose. I'm thankful for the perspective that we must all choose Christ as individuals, being unified in Him, and little else.

Conclusion

Whatever our culture or background, we are to seek God as individuals. If we use our free will to love Him on a large scale, as well as reach out and love one another, sin would undoubtedly have less of a hold over black, and every, culture.

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brethren to dwell together in unity” Psalm 133:1

ⁱ The Greeks often used this term to describe anyone who had not been trained in the Greek language and culture. When other cultures spoke, it sounded to the Greeks as if they were saying “Bar-bar-bar”, thus the term “barbarian”. It was essentially used to describe all non-Greeks and the term was not used quite like it is today.

ⁱⁱ An ancient nomadic and warlike people, noted for their savagery. They were hated and feared at the time.