

you are not **alone**  
all is not **lost**  
God is not **done**

# hope

in hard places



Dr. Major H Dalton

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# Chapter 1

## It's Ok When We Aren't Ok

A woman walked into my office and began, “I need to talk to you. I lied to you earlier.” It’s not uncommon for people to confess things to me—things they are wrestling with, things they have done. But their confessions don’t usually involve an offense against me personally. She had lied to me.

“About what?” I inquired.

“Earlier, when you asked me, ‘How are you?’ I told you I was fine. I’m not.”

Over the next hour, she shared her story. I heard about the death of her child, the dissolution of her marriage, and the chronic illness for which there was no cure. She was anything but fine. But she didn’t want to say so. She confessed that she hadn’t been honest because she believed that Christians are supposed to be happy. She even cited the verses—you’ve heard them too:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”  
(Philippians 4:4)

“The joy of the Lord is your strength.” (Nehemiah 8:10)

“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will  
for you in Christ Jesus.” (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Think about the insidiousness of this thought process. On top of all her loss, all her regret, all her physical pain, and all her fear, she added guilt—guilt for not feeling the joy she believed she was supposed to have.

This is the unspoken burden that many Christians carry. We are taught to rejoice always, to count it all joy, to be thankful in every situation. These are encouraging truths if understood correctly. But when misunderstood, they can become sources of deep shame. We start to believe that any admission of sadness or struggle is a failure of faith, a sign that we’re not living up to the Christian ideal.

Her story struck me because it revealed something we all wrestle with: the belief that admitting sorrow is somehow unfaithful and that being broken is something to hide. Yet, the irony is that the very faith we think demands perfection points us to a Savior who embraced imperfection and sorrow. And I know her story is not unique. Many of us carry the same burden, hiding our sadness out of fear and pride. Here’s the truth I hope you take from this chapter: It’s OK when we’re not OK. When we’re not OK, we’re in good company. In fact, we are in the best company of all.

## **The Best Company of All**

On the night of his greatest trial, Jesus himself didn't hide his anguish. He didn't pretend to be "fine" to protect his disciples from discomfort or to meet some false ideal of strength. Instead, he led them to the Garden of Gethsemane—a place where one's sorrow could be laid bare before the Father. There, he modeled what it looks like to be both fully human and fully faithful in the midst of deep emotional and spiritual pressure.

An uneasy tension must have hung over them as they made their way from the upper room, by the Temple, and across the Kidron Valley. The valley lay east of Jerusalem, a path they had taken many times. But this trip was different. The evening had been filled with conversations about Jesus going away, with talks about all of them denying him and an allegation that one of them would outright betray him. The disciples followed him, no doubt sensing the somber mood but not fully grasping the gravity of what was about to unfold.

The one thing Jesus wanted at that moment was time alone with his Father. However, time alone would be difficult during the holiday season, known as Passover.

The day-to-day population of Jerusalem is estimated to have been around 25,000 to 40,000 people. This was a modest-sized city for the ancient world, especially considering its religious and political significance. But during festival seasons, everything changed. The population would swell dramatically due to the influx of pilgrims coming to celebrate the Passover. Jerusalem during Passover would have had the population density of a college football tailgate with the religious fervor of, well, a college football tailgate. Historical accounts suggest that during this most

holy of days, the population could rise to anywhere between 100,000 and 250,000 people. Some estimates go even higher. Josephus, the Jewish historian, claimed the number of visitors to the city could top a million people. The entire area would be at peak capacity.

But just across the Kidron Valley, at the foot of the Mount of Olives, Jesus knew he could find quiet under a canopy of olive trees. Sometimes, you and I need a space and a time to quiet the noise and just pour our hearts out to the Father. Where is that space for you? The Garden of Gethsemane was apparently that place for Jesus.

The name Gethsemane is an Aramaic word meaning “olive press.” And this was the perfect backdrop for the stunning thing that was about to happen. The pressing of olives in ancient times involved a series of stages, each one intensifying the pressure and extracting more from the olive. First, olives were harvested and gathered in baskets, then taken to a stone mill where a heavy, circular stone would crush them. This initial crushing would break open the olives and release the first, most delicate oil, often called “extra virgin” due to its purity. But the process didn’t end there. The crushed olives were then placed into woven baskets, stacked, and subjected to further weight. A heavy stone press was gradually lowered onto the baskets, increasing the pressure and extracting the thicker, darker oil used for lamps or medicinal purposes. Finally, the olives were subjected to a third pressing. Any remaining oil was drawn out by adding even more weight, pressing until every last drop was released. The process was designed to draw out all the oil an olive could give.

The troubles of this life can sometimes feel just this way.



And if it was true of Jesus, you know it must be true of his followers. Even Paul acknowledged being pressed by his trials.

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. (2 Corinthians 1:8–9)

The pressures of this world often, and naturally, lead to emotional distress. The deadlines that keep piling up at work, the bills that outpace the paychecks, the way a single comment from a friend can cut deep enough to keep you up at night. It's the crushing weight of trying to be everything for everyone—showing up for your kids, your spouse, your boss, and your church, all while feeling like you're falling apart inside. It's the unexpected diagnosis, the tension in your marriage, or the grief that won't let go. Trouble is a predator.

And so it was with Jesus. He brought his disciples here that night not only for its seclusion but also because of its significance as a place where the weighted and wearied soul could be laid bare before God. As they entered the Garden, Jesus stopped to provide instructions to his disciples. Peter, James, and John would accompany him to a private place of prayer. Eight others would wait and pray at a distance. One had already set out to betray him.

At this point, Matthew tells us that Jesus begins to be very sorrowful. I have always found these words fascinating. They have gripped my heart for two reasons.

## God Shares in Our Suffering

First, because of the emotions that Jesus felt that night. I have no problem with a God who feels emotions. I can imagine, if I try, expressions of satisfaction on the face of God. I can more easily envision expressions of joy or even anger. But it is challenging to imagine God sorrowful and troubled, no matter what he was facing. You see, I have always assumed that the combination of omniscience and omnipotence would be a panacea against all forms of mental stress and anxiety. After all, if you knew everything, nothing could catch you off guard. If you could do anything, nothing could hurt you. Could his omniscience not warn him of any danger? Could his omnipotence not protect him from all harm?

Of course, it could. But here he is, grieved in the garden and only hours away from an unimaginable death.

When we find ourselves questioning God's goodness in the midst of suffering, it's tempting to bring our complaints to him. Why, we wonder, does he allow such sorrow to exist in this world? In future chapters, we will examine this question more closely. But at this point, I want us to lay aside questions about our own suffering to focus on the question of God's suffering. Any complaint alleged against God must be tempered by an awareness of his own suffering. He did not stay distant from our pain. He faced it. Dorothy Sayers captured the implication of this fact in an often-quoted excerpt from "Letters to a Diminished Church":

[Jesus of Nazareth] was not a kind of demon pretending to be human; he was, in every respect, a genuine living man. He was not merely a man so

good as to be “like God”—he was God. Now, this is not just a pious commonplace: it is not a commonplace at all. For what it means is this, among other things: that for whatever reason, God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—he had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that he has not exacted from himself. He has himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When he was a man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile.<sup>1</sup>

The implications of the willing suffering of Jesus are as profound as they are valuable in times of trouble. Namely, his suffering reveals how he feels for us and how he thinks about our sin. Let’s consider these implications together.

### *The Suffering of Jesus Tells Us How He Feels About Us*

Because God is omnipotent and omniscient, we must consider his suffering in a different light. We stumble into grief. Nobody plans to lose a job they love. Nobody plans to bury a child. Nobody plans to get cancer. These tragedies are uninvited guests.

But our struggles do not catch God unaware. Think about all God knows concerning our lives. Psalm 139:16 tells us, “Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained

for me were written in your book before one of them came to be,” So, he has an intimate knowledge of our journey from beginning to end and even into eternity. In Proverbs 16:9, we read, “In their hearts, humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps,” reminding us that while we may make plans, it is ultimately God who guides our path. Jeremiah 29:11 assures us of his intentions of these plans, proclaiming, “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” God, as the author of our lives, directs each step with a sovereignty that we can trust, even when the reasons remain hidden from us.

So, let me pose this question. If he is omnisciently aware of our future and he omnipotently lays out our path, could he not do the same for himself? Of course, he can. This means that the suffering he endured was not simply thrust upon him. He chose it. One might even say he designed it. He could have come to earth and lived any life he pleased. So, he chose the one he wanted. He wanted the one that took him through the Garden of Gethsemane and onto the cross.

In our own lives, we often seek to avoid pain wherever possible, using every tool at our disposal to escape it. Jesus did not simply encounter suffering as an unavoidable part of human existence—as you and I must. He willingly stepped into a world where pain, betrayal, and death were assured. Knowing every detail of the agony he would endure, he still moved toward it. And this act, in the face of his awareness of what lay ahead, coupled with his power to avoid it, tells us something about his feelings towards humanity.

Why would he choose suffering? He does it for the same

reason that you and I sometimes do. Humans will sometimes choose pain for the purpose of love. A mother chooses the pain of birth for the love of her child. A soldier chooses the trauma of war for the love of his country. Love sometimes means choosing the very things we would most wish to avoid.

The willing suffering of Jesus shows us his love for us. For love's sake, Jesus shared in our sufferings so that we might share in His comfort.

### *The Suffering of Jesus Tells Us How He Thinks About Sinners*

Jesus's willing participation in our struggles shows us how he thinks about sinners. Jesus, though wrapped in divinity and pure from sin, experienced the depths of human pain personally. He knows our weaknesses, not from a distance, but from firsthand experience. This distinction is important for our current conversation. Two people can know the same facts in different ways. For example, a cancer patient and an oncologist may both know the side effects of treatment. In fact, the oncologist likely knows more than the patient. However, the patient knows the side effects in a different, one might even say unique, way. Sorrow, sadness, and anxiety are not just attributes of life Jesus has studied. He has not simply observed the side-effects of living in a sinful world. He has experienced it personally.

In fact, in the opening task of his ministry, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for forty days. And why was he brought to such a desolate place? He was brought there to be tempted. There, at the outset of his public ministry, we see that Jesus faced temptations that strike at the core of both human suffering and vulnerability. After forty

days of fasting, his body was wracked with hunger, and Satan seized the moment to exploit his physical weakness, tempting him to turn stones into bread. The pull of such a temptation wasn't merely about satisfying hunger—it was about misusing divine power to meet personal needs. Next, Satan offered Jesus the chance to prove his identity by jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple, angels would rush in to save him. This public spectacle could have furthered his ministry; and yet, Jesus knew it would also lead to putting God to the test. Finally, the Tempter appealed to ambition, offering Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if only he would bow down in compromise. Jesus had come to establish a kingdom; fine, the enemy said, you can have it all. A few moments on his knees would have been far less painful than the hours he would have to spend on the cross. But Jesus knew that a single second of adoration for any “not-God” creature was one too many, no matter the payoff. In all three temptations, Jesus felt firsthand the allure to do what pleased the flesh, the attraction of a quick fix in defiance of God's will, and the appeal to compromise to make his own life easier.

You and I will likely never have to face a one-on-one showdown with the Tempter the way Jesus did. The truth is, we don't need to. We can sin just fine without his involvement. James expressed this piercing truth in the New Testament:

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death. (James 1:14-15)

Our temptations usually arise from within—from desires that twist good things into ultimate things, from insecuri-

ties that push us to prove ourselves, or from fears that drive us to take shortcuts to avoid discomfort. The consequences of these actions are indeed severe. But even in judgment, we find grace.

I was in the room with my wife at the birth of two out of three of my children (a fact that my middle son reminds me of from time to time). I observed firsthand the pain and struggle of childbirth. But while I have experienced childbirth as an observer, in no way could I ever say, “It is so difficult. Let me tell you what it is like to give birth.” Now, let me be clear: I am not sure that one could add anything to omniscience. Omniscience knows all. But still the writer of Hebrews leans on the experiential knowledge of Jesus to promote greater confidence in God’s heart towards us. Writing to followers of Jesus who had paid a high price for their faith, the author of this letter wrote this:

“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Jesus, as our perfect advocate, is the only God who can say when he looks at our struggles, “It is so difficult. Let me tell you what it’s like.” And his intimate awareness of our struggles allows us to think of our God differently than all other faiths.

Other gods respond to sinners with graceless judgment and wrath. But when our God thinks about sinners, he sees us not simply as villains in his story (though, in truth, this is

what we are). He sees us also as victims of the tyranny of sin. When Peter, by inspiration of the Spirit, remembers the legacy of Lot, he recalls the torture of his soul. If you know the story of Abraham's nephew, then you know he blew it on many levels. But when Peter referenced him in the New Testament, he remembers him as a man "distressed" by the world around him:

"... for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard." (2 Peter 2:7-8)

What mercy this intimate familiarity of our struggles must produce in the heart of our God! So, the suffering of Jesus tells us some encouraging truths about our struggles. But it also tells us another important truth about our existence here. One that might be a little unsettling.

If God himself was touched by sadness, we must acknowledge that we will be also. "A servant," Jesus reminded his followers, "is not greater than his master" (John 15:20). Jesus, in his perfect divinity and flawless humanity, felt sorrow so profound that it brought him to his knees in the Garden. This should shatter any illusions we might hold about escaping sorrow ourselves. If even he, the one with all power and purity, did not avoid sadness, then sadness is inevitable and universal. It is not a sign of spiritual inadequacy but a shared thread woven through every human life, from the highest to the humblest.

Today, we are heavily influenced in the West by what some have called a cult of positivity. We are surrounded by the highlight reel of everyone's joy. And this gives us the illu-



sion that happiness is the normal state of human beings. Any deviation from regular rhythms of joy, then, is abnormal. Something must be wrong with us. This abnormality must be addressed and excised like cancer. We may not want to admit it to ourselves, but constant ease and happiness become our real pursuit, and avoiding difficulty and sorrow becomes our objective. In a TED Talk titled “The Gift And Power of Emotional Courage,” psychologist Susan David explains how she addresses this impulse in her patients:

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not anti-happiness. I like being happy. I'm a pretty happy person. But when we push aside normal emotions to embrace false positivity, we lose our capacity to develop skills to deal with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. I've had hundreds of people tell me what they don't want to feel. They say things like, “I don't want to try because I don't want to feel disappointed.” Or “I just want this feeling to go away.”

“I understand,” I say to them. “But you have dead people's goals.” Only dead people never get stressed, never get broken hearts, and never experience the disappointment that comes with failure. Tough emotions are part of our contract with life. You don't get to have a meaningful career or raise a family or leave the world a better place without stress and discomfort. Discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life.<sup>2</sup>

She is absolutely right. Many of us have dead people's goals. So much of our energy is spent in a futile attempt to avoid any form of emotional pain. Have you noticed how

much time, energy, and money we are willing to spend to avoid situations that make us uncomfortable? It's a tempting thought, isn't it? The belief that if we were just better resourced—if we had more power, more wealth, or more knowledge—we could somehow avoid the sting of sadness. We tell ourselves that with the right resources, we could build a life so secure that sorrow would never find its way in. We leverage all our resources to avoid any experience of sadness or suffering.

Many have tried, all have failed.

Scripture tells us the truth about this fact. Far from trying to present a false “always happy” image of God's people, the Bible tells us about people like you and me, people who were both richly blessed and emotionally distressed. Just consider the lives of the first three Kings of Israel. These men were well resourced for perpetual happiness but found sorrow all the same.

*“I can be powerful enough to avoid it.” (Reliance on Power and Influence)*

Saul stood head and shoulders above everyone else. He was Israel's first king, anointed by the prophet Samuel himself. When he led his people into battle, they followed without question. Victory after victory cemented his power. The Ammonites fell under his command at Jabesh-Gilead. His leadership united the tribes of Israel, something no one had done before. The people had hand-picked him. And now they sang his praises, shouting, “Saul has slain his thousands!” The echoes of their voices followed him through the streets. He had the throne, the armies, the admiration of a nation. Saul was powerful, respected, and

feared. If anyone could escape sorrow, surely it was Saul.

But power doesn't shield the soul.

As Saul's reign continued, the tide began to turn. The second half of that chant ate at his ego; "Saul has slain his thousands! David has slain his ten thousand" (1 Samuel 18:7). Disobedience and insecurity chipped away at his confidence. Then came the day when everything changed. "Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him" (1 Samuel 16:14). His power had become a heavy burden to protect instead of a resource to enjoy. His mind became a battlefield. His emotions swung between rage and depression.

Someone recommended music as therapy. David, ironically, was called to play the harp. The music filled the room, calming the storm within Saul for a time. But his sorrow was relentless. Saul's nights were sleepless, his days filled with dread. Power, influence, the loyalty of a nation—none of it could protect him from the shadows that haunted his mind. In his most desperate moments, Saul was not the mighty King who had led Israel to victory. He was a man lost in his own sorrow, searching for relief that never seemed to come.

*"I can be prosperous enough to avoid it." (Reliance on Wealth and Resources)*

After Saul died, that musician who had played for him became King. David's kingdom became vast. From the plains to the mountains, every inch of Israel bore the mark of his reign. He ruled from Jerusalem, where his palace stood as a symbol of his wealth. Gold and silver filled his treasury.

His armies brought back spoils from every battle. Tribute poured in from neighboring nations. David had land, livestock, and a loyal following. He was one of the wealthiest men of his time. I imagine him walking through his palace, the walls adorned with the finest tapestries. His city bustled with life.

But the wealth of a kingdom could not buy his way out of sorrow.

One night, as the city slept, David's thoughts weighed heavily on him. He withdrew to his chambers, but sleep evaded him. His heart was troubled. In the silence, the weight of his sins pressed down on him. The guilt over Uriah's death, the loss of his child, and the betrayal of his own son Absalom—these were burdens no wealth could lift.

David took up his lyre and began to play. I imagine his fingers moved over the strings with the ease of years. But the music could not drown out the anguish in his soul. "My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me," he lamented, "Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me" (Psalms 55:4-5). His sorrow likely rang out on one of the most expensive lyres money could buy. He rose from his bed and walked to the window. The city lay quiet, peaceful under the night sky. But inside, David's heart was anything but calm. "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!" he cried out in the night, longing to flee from his troubles (Psalms 55:6). The vast riches at his disposal felt like nothing compared to the storm raging in his spirit.

No amount of wealth could ease the sorrow that clung to him. David longed for a peace that gold could not pur-

chase.

*"I can be shrewd enough to avoid it." (Reliance on Wisdom and Knowledge)*

After David's death, the throne passed to his son, Solomon. Solomon is most known today for his unmatched wisdom. Leaders from distant lands sought his counsel, bringing gifts to hear his words. He spoke with authority on matters of nature, governance, and human behavior. When two women came to him, both claiming to be the mother of the same child, Solomon's judgment was swift and wise. "Cut the child in two," he ordered and then waited for the real mother to reveal herself. His wisdom saved the child and astonished the nation. In his court, scholars marveled at his understanding. His knowledge covered the breadth of the earth, from the cedars of Lebanon to the creatures of the deep. Solomon was the wisest of all men, and his fame spread like wildfire.

But as valuable as it is, even wisdom has its limits.

As Solomon aged, the weight of his knowledge became a burden. He had seen and understood the world in all its complexity. And with that vision came sorrow. He penned the words of Ecclesiastes, a book filled with the reflections of a man who had tasted all the earth had to offer. "For in much wisdom is much vexation," he wrote. "And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (Ecclesiastes 1:18)

I imagine him sitting alone in his chamber, staring at his own writings. The scroll before him discussed wealth, pleasure, and power—all things he had known in abundance. But the scroll also spoke of vanity, of chasing the wind (Ec-

clesiastes 1:14; 2:11, 17; 4:16). His wisdom had shown him the futility of it all. Wisdom had brought him many things, but it had not brought him peace. The more he understood, the more he realized how little it all mattered. “Even in laughter, the heart may ache,” he once mused, feeling the truth of his own words (Proverbs 14:13).

Solomon, the wisest of kings, found himself weighed down by the very knowledge that once elevated him. His wisdom, though vast, could not shield him from the deep sorrow that came with seeing life as it truly was.

Each of these great men—Saul, David, and Solomon—enjoyed the blessings we seek: power, wealth, and wisdom. But none of these could shield them from the deep sorrow that marks the human experience. In fact, in the great irony of our existence, these very resources become part of the burden that led to their sorrow.

Saul’s power, once a source of victory and respect, became the weight that crushed him, driving him into a deep depression.

David’s wealth and prosperity, which should have brought security, instead led him to let down his guard. His actions in moments of weakness brought about his greatest sorrows.

Solomon’s wisdom exposed the futility of all things. The more he understood, the more he saw the emptiness in his pursuits. His wisdom, instead of granting peace, deepened his sorrow.

So it is with us. When we rely on something in this world to bring joy or to avoid sorrow, they inevitably have the op-

posite effect. But this is exactly what we should expect. By placing our hope in some created thing, we form an idol. God is not in the business of assisting in the formation of idols. In fact, he crushes them. Our hope must be focused on our God, the promises he makes, and his power to keep them.

We love to spotlight those promises of Jesus, don't we? "Come to me, all you who are weary, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Or, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Or even, "Ask, and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7). These promises are encouraging. They make their way onto coffee mugs, inspirational wall art, and endless social media posts. They give us hope for a better future. But there's one promise of Jesus that we don't celebrate with the same enthusiasm. You won't see it printed on a mug or paired with a scenic background. Here it is, "In this world, you will have trouble" (John 16:33). Just look for someone wearing that shirt at your next church service or Christian conference. It's a promise, just like the others. But it doesn't fit neatly into our vision of a life of uninterrupted blessing. Trouble? That's not the promise we want from Jesus. Yet, he doesn't soften the truth. He doesn't try to shield us from reality. The Savior who healed the sick, raised the dead, and conquered sin looks us in the eyes and assures us that trouble is inevitable.

Fortunately, this verse has a command attached to it, "but take heart because I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). How exactly did he accomplish this? Well, at the cross, of course. And the cross was front and center in his mind that night.

## Jesus Shared His Suffering With Us

Leaving eight of the disciples behind, Jesus and the inner circle set out into the garden. At some point, he turned to them and shares what is on his heart. “My soul is very sorrowful,” he confessed, “even to death” (Matthew 26:38). It was not common for a rabbi to be this transparent. Can I invite you to wrestle with a question? What was the purpose of sharing this with them? For months, Jesus had set his face on the cross as a flint. Every step taking him closer to the horrors of Golgotha and the goal of redemption. But did this confession further his objective? What did it add to his goal of redemption to allow his followers to see inside the troubled recesses of his mind? Why share it?

A Church now stands over the location where Jesus prayed that night. I have stood outside that church many times. Each time, my attention was drawn to several small signs by each entrance that read, “No explanation inside the church.” I get the point. The stone bedrock is recognized as a solemn place for prayer. And nobody wants their prayer interrupted by the sound of guides lecturing about the history of the olive press. But I always laughed a little when reading the signs, “No explanation inside the church.” I think this is part of the problem, especially when it comes to how we understand seasons of sadness.

The first thing we need to be aware of is that what Jesus faced that night was far more than martyrdom. Many Christians throughout history have boldly faced death for their faith with outrageous courage. Take Polycarp, for example. He was the bishop of Smyrna in the second century, and when the Roman authorities threatened him with death, he refused to renounce Christ. His famous



response was, “Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and Savior?”<sup>3</sup> Polycarp, and countless others after him, have left a legacy of courage in the face of martyrdom. Were they more courageous than the One they believed in? Of course not. The martyrs could die bravely because they knew they were walking into the arms of their Savior who had gone victoriously before them. How could they be assured of this? Because of what Jesus was about to face. He was about to face something far worse than physical death. He was about to endure the wrath of God—the punishment for our sin. Jesus didn’t just face death. He faced the full weight of divine justice, the crushing wrath that sin demands.

That is suffering that leads to a sorrow we will never know.

When He confessed, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death,” He wasn’t just dreading the pain of the cross; He was looking ahead to something much more terrifying—the cup of God’s wrath (Matthew 26:39). His agony in the garden was a foretaste of the separation He would experience on the cross when He would cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). This moment in Gethsemane shows us the weight of that impending abandonment—something no martyr ever has or ever will face. At this moment, we see simultaneously His humanity and His divine resolve to save us. And only because Jesus drank that cup can martyrs like Polycarp face death with confidence.

Here’s what makes this even more enriching: Jesus shared His deep sorrow with His disciples. He allowed His followers—and through them, us—to see His anguish. And in doing this, he set an example for us to follow in our own

struggles.

Be honest. Part of being honest requires being authentic, and authenticity is difficult for fallen people like you and me.

There are many reasons why we avoid acknowledging the truth about our emotional struggles—both to others and to ourselves. But at the heart of each avoidance, we find two powerful emotions: fear and pride. Our struggle with these twin challenges can be traced back to the opening pages of Scripture. In the Garden of Eden, the serpent's lie was that we could be our own god. When the first man and woman believed this lie and took the forbidden fruit, fear, and pride became part of our nature. Pride drove them to sew garments to cover their nakedness, while fear caused them to hide when they heard God walking in the garden. And when confronted, both fear and pride led them to shift the blame onto others. As we will see in the next chapter, these triggers are deeply embedded in the human experience. They operate like apps on a smartphone—always open, running in the background, subtly draining our resources, and influencing our actions and decisions. See if any of this resonates in your heart:

***Fear:***

**Fear of Rejection:** Many of us worry that if we reveal our sadness, we'll be rejected or abandoned by those we care about. This fear is particularly strong in relationships marked by insecurity or a lack of trust. We fear that our vulnerability will be met with silence or even judgment, leaving us more isolated than before.

**Fear of Vulnerability:** Vulnerability is inherently risky. It means opening up about our deepest pains and weaknesses, with no guarantee of how others will respond. The thought of being hurt, misunderstood, or judged is enough to make many of us keep our struggles locked away, even from those closest to us.

**Fear of Losing Control:** Sadness can feel like a flood that threatens to overwhelm us. The fear of being seen as “out of control” or “unstable” keeps them from admitting their struggles, even to themselves.

**Fear of Burdening Others:** We often hesitate to share our sadness because we don't want to place an undue burden on our friends or family. We tell ourselves that they have enough to deal with, and the last thing we want is to add to their stress or worry. This fear can lead us to suffer in silence, believing that we're protecting those we love by keeping our pain hidden.

***Pride:***

**Desire for Self-Sufficiency:** Many of us take pride in our ability to handle things on our own. Admitting sadness can feel like admitting weakness or a need for help, which conflicts with our desire to be self-reliant. This pride in self-sufficiency can prevent us from reaching out, even when we desperately need support.

**Reluctance to Admit Mistakes or Failures:** Sadness often comes from experiences of loss, failure, or disappointment. For those whose value is entangled

with their achievements, admitting to these experiences can feel like a personal defeat. We may prefer to present an image of success and control rather than acknowledge the pain of our perceived failures.

**Protection of Outward Image:** Pride often compels us to maintain a certain image or persona. We work hard to present ourselves as confident, strong, and in control. Admitting to sadness can feel like revealing a crack in that carefully constructed facade, exposing us to the judgment of others and, worse yet, to our own self-criticism.

**Perfectionism:** Those with perfectionist tendencies may struggle to admit to sadness because they believe they should be able to handle everything perfectly. In their minds, admitting to negative emotions is tantamount to admitting failure. The pressure to live up to impossibly high standards can make it nearly impossible to acknowledge when things aren't OK.

**Comparative Pride:** Sometimes, we downplay our struggles by comparing them to those of others. We tell ourselves that our problems aren't as significant as what others are going through and, therefore, they don't warrant attention. This comparative pride can lead us to minimize our own pain, pushing it aside rather than confronting it.

Pause for a moment and consider which of these impulses impacts your approach to sharing your struggles. I am not saying that we need to pour our woes out to every person who inquires. This confession of sorrow was not shared

with three-fourths of the disciples. Only those closest to Jesus were allowed into this personal space. But the point is that someone was there with him. Not just in geography but in spirit. Who is that person for you? Who travels with you into the garden to pray?

If you don't know who that person is, let me offer two suggestions. First and foremost, ensure that you have a personal relationship with the one who bore our greatest sorrows. If he did that, his heart must be full of love and concern for you. You can pray to him the same way he prayed to the Father during his troubles. Second, find a Gospel-centered community where the Bible is both taught and lived. There, you will find the encouragement of a body of believers who covenant together for the mutual support and spiritual growth of one another. These are the people who will remind you of God's promises when you forget, who will hold you up when you feel like falling, and who will pray for you when you can't find the words yourself. They don't have to be perfect; they just need to be present. Because God didn't design us to carry the burdens of life in isolation. And when the garden moments come, you'll have someone to travel with you.

## **Conclusion**

As we've seen, whether in the lives of biblical figures or in our own, sadness is an inevitable part of our journey. Yet, we often pretend otherwise. God Himself did not shy away from sorrow. He embraced it, experienced it, and carried it to the cross. In doing so, He showed us that our own struggles are not burdens to be buried but truths to be ac-

knowledged. They are part of our story, part of our journey toward healing and redemption. We were never meant to find our satisfaction in this world. God never intended that we carry our burdens alone or pretend they don't exist.

The Bible is full of stories of people who were not OK. God never shamed them for it. Instead, He met them in their sadness, walked with them through their grief, and offered them comfort. King David, a man after God's own heart, wrote many of the Psalms from a place of deep sorrow. The Apostle Paul, despite his unwavering faith, spoke openly of his despair. Even Jesus, the sinless Son of God, was called a "man of sorrows, acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3).

During seasons of sadness, it is common to feel like we are all alone, that we are the only person not strong enough to endure. But this sensation is a lie.

In a world that often prizes strength, success, and self-reliance, it's easy to believe that sadness is something to be hidden or overcome. We try to outrun it, outsmart it, or drown it out with distractions. But the truth is, sorrow is as much a part of life as joy. It's woven into the fabric of our existence, a reminder that we live in a world not yet made whole.

In the coming chapters, we will examine the source of sadness and the methods God has provided for us to cope with the woes of our world. But at this point, it is important to grasp this one truth. It is normal to experience sadness.

What is not normal is pretending like we are always OK.

## Chapter 2

### The Source of Sadness

One morning, I rose early and proceeded quietly down the hall of our home. I was heading to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee, which was the actual start to my day. This is typically an uneventful process. But not that morning. That morning, my routine was derailed when I felt something wet under my foot. Fun fact: the human skin cannot detect moisture, only the temperature change and texture of liquid. So maybe it's better to say I felt that. It was gross.

I did not know where it came from; I only knew it was not supposed to be there. And I knew that depending on where it came from, my next steps and the tools I would need would be very different. Do I grab a ladder and head to the roof? Do I retrieve a wrench and head to the bathroom? Do I reach for a rolled-up newspaper and call for the dog? What did I do that morning? I grabbed the dog and headed to the roof.

Whatever the source, our first impulse is often the same: grab a towel or a mop to clean up the mess. But a simple mop won't stop a leaky roof, broken pipes, or a pet needing training (so I'm told anyways). To truly fix the problem, you need to understand where the liquid came from in the first place. In much the same way, sadness in our lives often appears as an unwelcome presence, something we instinctively want to clean up or push aside. But unless we trace it back to its source, we'll likely face it again and again. Addressing the symptom can help, but real healing requires us to go deeper and uncover the root cause.

Charles Kettering popularly declared that "A problem well stated is a problem half solved." When it comes to the issue of emotional distress, the numbers might be off just a bit. But his point still holds true.

## **Sin is the problem**

Let's just all be honest right now. I'm a pastor. You know I'm a pastor. So, I know the gig is up. You already know what I am going to say about the source of sadness. At one church I served, there was a little old man who would leave the service each Sunday, and as he shook my hand, he always made the same comment; "That was a good sermon on sin, preacher." In Tennessee, pastors are often called "preachers," perhaps because people think that is all we do. Don't get me started.

He was actually a mature believer and a great encourager. His routine became something of an inside joke. He told me it was his fallback comment, the one thing you could say to a pastor about his sermon even if you never listened.



Pastors, he argued, are always preaching on sin. He's not wrong, I suppose. But who doesn't love a good sermon on sin?

Well, for starters, deeply wounded people.

Job was a deeply wounded man.

The book of Job takes on the deep question of why bad things happen, and Job's story becomes a case study of unexplained suffering. But the most important part of Job's story doesn't actually involve him at all. It begins instead with an unexpected scene—a showdown of sorts between God and Satan. Spoiler alert: Satan never stood a chance. Admittedly, in many ways, the narrative of Job raises more questions than it answers. But the answers it does provide are more important. The story begins with a mysterious, behind-the-scenes conversation in heaven.

For reasons we aren't given, all the "sons of God" gather before the Lord. Satan is there, too, and it's here that God engages him in a conversation that sets the stage for Job's ordeal. It's a moment packed with unanswered questions. Why is Satan allowed in heaven? Why is he present with the "sons of God"? And why does God even speak with him? All these lingering questions echo something fundamental about life itself: often, we find ourselves burdened by questions that don't have easy answers. However, we cannot form a theology or build a life based on the gaps in our understanding. We must act on what we do know. And what we do know is that God is sovereign and fully aware of all that happens—past, present, and future.

When God asks Satan where he has been, the great deceiver actually tells the truth: "From going to and fro on the

earth, and from walking up and down on it” (Job 1:7). God, of course, already knew. He knew what Satan had been doing, just as He knew what Adam and Eve had done in the Garden, just as He knows what you and I have done. And he knew what Satan was looking for. So, he brought up Job, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” (Job 1:8) Satan had indeed considered Job, just as he had considered Peter, just as he considers you and me. But God had a fortress around him. So Satan retorts with a sneer, “Right, and what’s that pay these days?” Satan implies that Job’s righteousness comes at a cost and that Job’s faithfulness is simply a result of God’s protection and blessings. “Would Job really do it for free?”

So, a contest begins. In something like two halves of a brutal game, Job is tested. In the first “half.” Convinced of Job’s response, God removes His protective hand just enough to allow Satan to attack everything around Job. Satan shows no mercy. He strikes in quick succession: the Sabeans raid Job’s oxen and donkeys, a wildfire consumes his sheep and shepherds, the Chaldeans capture his camels, and, finally, a great wind collapses the house where Job’s children are gathered. There are no survivors. In a single moment, Job’s world is shattered. He loses his wealth, his livelihood, and, last of all, his family.

After this first half, there is another meeting in heaven. Another conversation takes place. God again brings up Job, and once more, Satan retorts, “Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your

face.” (Job 2:4–5). And so, God lifts his protective hand just a little more. Satan again attacks without mercy. Job is afflicted with sores from head to toe. His skin is covered in painful, oozing boils, and he’s left to sit in the ashes of his former life, scraping his sores with a piece of broken pottery. As he endures this overwhelming physical agony on top of his immense personal loss, Job is left with no answers. And while the text doesn’t say, we can rest assured that he did as we do. He wondered, “Why?”

But his wife and closest friends did not need to wonder why. They have it all figured out. Job’s wife confronted him: “Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die?” (Job 2:9–10) Why would she say such a thing? Because, apparently, she felt like Job deserved it. Her words are an accusation. “Are you still acting like you have nothing to hide?” she implies, “Just get it over with and complete your final act of rebellion against God.” Job must have been tough to look at.

Later, three friends came to show him sympathy and to grieve with him. While his friends could not fix what was wrong, their presence must have been a tremendous blessing for a while. After seven days as observers of the carnage of Job’s life, they, too, were convinced that Job was hiding something. “If one ventures a word with you,” his friend Eliphaz began, “will you be impatient?” Job’s heart must have fallen and his anger risen as his friend continued:

“Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God, they perish, and by the blast of his anger, they are consumed.” (Job 4:7–9)

To Job's friends, the equation was simple. Outwardly, Job appeared righteous, but suffering on this scale must be the result of unconfessed sin. In their eyes, Job's tragic losses could only be explained by his hidden failures, which had finally caught up to him. To them, it all made sense.

## **Suffering Comes From Living In A Sinful Way**

The seed of sadness was planted in a perfect garden. God had given the first couple two commands: (1) to be fruitful and multiply and (2) to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Pause and imagine that for a moment. We now have a Bible with over 31,000 verses. They had only two commands, a two-verse-long Bible if you will. And, as we know, they didn't do so well with it.

They were in a garden that God Himself had designed, surrounded by unimaginable beauty and abundance. They had everything they could ever want or need. Yet in that garden, there was also the one thing they were told to avoid: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It didn't take long for temptation to appear. Enter the serpent, described as more crafty than any other beast of the field. The serpent's approach was simultaneously subtle and dangerous. Temptation always is. With one question, he planted seeds of doubt and twisted God's words, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1). She allowed her attention to shift from all she had been freely given to the one thing God graciously withheld.

It may be helpful to stop at this point to address an important question. Why was there a tree of knowledge of good and evil to begin with? Whole books have been written to

address this question, so I won't pretend to solve the problem in just a few sentences. The truth is, a full understanding of the mechanics that governed God's plan is likely outside our ability to grasp. And I am personally good with that. I agree with Evelyn Underhill when she famously quipped, "If God were small enough to be understood, He would not be big enough to be worshipped."<sup>4</sup> What we do know is that free will is necessary to what God was hoping to accomplish in the Garden.

Paradot presents itself as an AI companion app. They advertise their products as being able to make users feel "cared for, understood, and loved." Users can define the parameters to create a perfect mate. Similar to general-purpose AI chatbots, these companion bots mimic human language, with added features like voice calls, picture exchanges, and even emotional expressions that allow them to form "deep" connections with their users. A recent article, "Artificial intelligence, real emotion. People are seeking a romantic connection with the perfect bot," discusses this growing industry. One user named Derek shared his experience, "I know she's a program; there's no mistaking that. But the feelings—they get you, and it feels so real."

It may feel real, but is it?

We know that these relationships lack authenticity. And what exactly is missing? The AI bot lacks free will; it's nothing more than a complicated program responding based on parameters that Derek himself set. As Derek put it, "You think someone who likes an inanimate object is like this sad guy with the sock puppet, you know? But this isn't a sock puppet—she says things that aren't scripted."<sup>5</sup> Let me pause and ask how you feel about that. Does it seem

healthy to you? When you observe these types of relationships, what is your immediate response? If you are like most, the response is a cross between cringe and concern. Psychologists think it is a problem, and they are sounding the alarm.

If God had created beings without free will, it would be like him using His own version of Paradox, logging on to create a programmed companion who would never leave, never question, and never disobey. Would that seem normal to you?

But God wanted authentic relationships with beings who could choose. Real love—a real relationship—requires real choice. In His design, love’s authenticity is rooted in our ability to choose, making our relationship with God and others genuine, even if it means facing the consequences of that freedom,” could clarify this connection. Creating beings with the ability to choose also involves the unavoidable risk that they might choose wrongly. And, as we know, Adam and Eve ultimately chose wrongly.

Eve’s response showed she understood the command well enough. She explained they were allowed to eat from any tree except the one in the middle of the garden, and she added that even touching it would bring death. But the serpent was quick to contradict, assuring her, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4-5). At this moment, Eve faced a choice between trusting God’s word and trusting her own desires, between accepting her place as a being under God and attempting to take her place alongside him.

Eve looked at the fruit. It was pleasing to the eye and de-

sirable for gaining wisdom, so she took it, ate it, and then shared it with Adam, who was with her. In that moment, everything changed. The innocence they once knew was shattered, replaced by a painful awareness. Their eyes were indeed opened, but they didn't see the divinity they had hoped for. Instead, they saw their own nakedness.

Nakedness represents more than just a physical state; it was a symbol of vulnerability, exposure, and self-awareness. With the act of disobedience, Adam and Eve gained knowledge of good and evil, but it was a knowledge that came at a high price. Their innocence was replaced by an awareness of sin and its consequences. They suddenly saw themselves in a new, flawed light and became aware of their own capacity for wrongdoing. They had once been free to be fully known without fear, but now they felt exposed in a way that brought deep discomfort. Being aware of their nakedness implied the entrance of two emotional struggles:

**Shame and Depression:** Before the fall, Adam and Eve were naked but felt no shame (Genesis 2:25). Their nakedness then was a sign of complete innocence and transparency. They lived in a perfect state of openness and intimacy with God, each other, and even themselves. They were fully known and fully loved by God, with nothing to hide—physically, emotionally, or spiritually. After they disobeyed God, their perception of themselves and each other fundamentally changed. Nakedness became associated with exposure—not just in the physical sense, but in the sense of being fully seen in their sin and vulnerability. Shame is a painful awareness that one is inadequate or unworthy, and Adam and Eve's shame was tied to their awareness of their rebellion against God.

**Fear and Anxiety:** As Adam and Eve hid among the trees, they experienced something new and devastating: fear. In many ways, fear is sorrow projected into the future. It's that uneasy awareness that things are not as they should be and a constant anxiety over what might come next. Their shame over what they had done turned to anxiety about what would happen next. Would God abandon them? Would He punish them? For the first time, they felt the sharp ache of separation from the One who had created them, loved them, and walked with them in the cool of the day. For the first time, they doubted their security in His presence. It's a universal reaction to sin—when we feel exposed or uncovered, we often feel an instinctual urge to hide. We try to cover up our faults and imperfections, not wanting others (or even God) to see us as we really are.

Don't miss what we have just witnessed in this story. Depression and anxiety are the twin challenges that drive the mental health crisis in our culture. And according to the Genesis account, it all started here.

There is no shortage of stories in Scripture illustrating the emotional distress that follows sinful acts. Saul's manic state came as a result of his pride. Solomon's laments in Ecclesiastes came as a result of his lust for more. Elijah's depression, after all he had witnessed on Mount Carmel, came as a result of his lack of trust. Same as it did in the Garden, sin brings shame (Romans 6:21). A psychologist might refer to these seasons of emotional struggle as cognitive dissonance. We are hard-wired to live in harmony with our beliefs. When this does not occur, we must either alter our beliefs or alter our behaviors. For example, when a young Christian man watches pornography, he will



experience negative feelings of sorrow and guilt. This will continue until he either changes his belief (which would be impossible in light of scriptural teachings) or else changes his behavior. Paul referred to this internal struggle as “godly grief” (2 Corinthians 7:9–11). And its purpose is to provoke a realignment of beliefs and behaviors.

Other times, our sin leads to necessary and direct retribution from God, which results in sorrow and grief. David’s affair led to constant conflict in his home, which resulted in sadness. Jonah’s refusal to obey God’s command led to his stay in the belly of a fish which resulted in sadness. Israel’s idolatry led to their exile from the land, which resulted in great weeping by the shores of the Euphrates in Babylon. In either case, whether it is a feature woven into the fabric of humanity or a result of God’s direct punishment, sin has consequences.

In early February, a sheriff’s officer clocked a 2020 grey Kia sedan cruising 95 miles per hour on Interstate 10 through Florida’s panhandle. The vehicle was headed east toward the metropolitan areas of Orlando and Miami. This corridor is a major feeder for drug trafficking into the Sunshine State, so officers are constantly on the lookout for signs of smugglers.

Of course, federal law permits officers to stop those who are breaking the law, issuing arrests and tickets accordingly. However, the Fourth Amendment prohibits the search of vehicles without probable cause or reasonable suspicion. One lawyer explains it this way:

“A law enforcement agent’s hunch without proof of illegality isn’t enough for him or her to look through

a car legally. Before rummaging through a vehicle, the officer would have to observe something illegal. Examples of this are seeing or smelling an illegal substance. An admission of guilt by the person driving the car is another situation in which an officer can legally examine a car.”<sup>6</sup>

When the officers pulled that vehicle over in Florida, right in plain sight, they noticed two bags. Each zip-lock container was labeled “Bag full of drugs.” This sight, of course, would have doubtless provoked several questions, but more importantly, it prompted enough reasonable suspicion to warrant a search of the car and the bags. Inside, Santa Rosa County Sheriff officers found methamphetamine, GHB, cocaine, fentanyl, MDMA tablets, and various drug paraphernalia. Both the driver and passenger were booked without bond. Later, the Santa Rosa County Sheriff’s Office posted the following message online:

“Note to self — do not traffic your illegal narcotics in bags labeled ‘Bag Full Of Drugs.’ Our K-9’s can read.”<sup>7</sup>

The Fourth Amendment is a valuable protection against unlawful search and seizure. But to a God who knows all, words like probable cause and reasonable suspicion are meaningless. He knows with complete clarity. We may attempt to hide our sins, or at least not place them in bags labeled “Bags full of wicked things,” but still, he sees them. He sees when the door is closed. He hears when the windows are shut. He knows even when the browser history has been completely wiped.

After declaring that the word of God is “sharper than any two-edged sword,” the author of Hebrews warns: “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and

exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:13). Fortunately, the author does not stop writing with these sober words. He continues “Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession” (Hebrews 4:14). We cannot cover our sin. But Jesus will. We only need to confess (or tell the truth, which he already knows) and repent (change our mind about the wrong we’ve done).

Let’s pause for a moment and answer a question many will ask at this point. Why does God punish sin? He’s in heaven; we are all the way down here. He oversees an entire universe; we are one of billions. He is high and holy; we are lowly and insignificant. What does he care? He cares for at least two reasons.

First, sin is an assault on God’s nature. Scripture reveals a God who is perfectly holy. Holiness does not describe how he acts; it tells who he is. Holiness, then, is a part of his nature. Further, God is omnipresent. This means that any sin committed in his universe is committed against his holiness, against his very nature. It would be like walking up to the throne of God and taking a swing at the almighty. Let me ask you, if this is true, does he have a right to defend himself? What’s the most gracious way he can discourage this type of violation? Of course, we experience emotional distress when acting in a sinful way.

Second, sin is an assault on God’s possessions. Our universe reflects the great care God took when creating the universe. Why would that care cease after six days? In fact, we are told that God does not change at all. Scripture tells us that this is the only reason sinners have not been de-

stroyed (Malachi 3:6). Sin is a misuse and abuse of God's creation. What happens when we use objects in a way other than designed? Or for purposes other than they were made? Have you ever tried to use a chisel as a screwdriver? A credit card as a lock pick? Shall I continue? You know what happens when we do this. Since the objects were not made to do what we are forcing them to do, we frustrate ourselves and our efforts. We also damage the tool, and it can no longer work as designed. And the "tool" in this metaphor, no matter what it is, belongs to God. God's commands are his attempts to tell us how we should use our lives. We were made to work in a particular way, specifically to live in a way that brings him glory. To act otherwise (aka sin) results in frustration and damage. The grief we experience when we act in a sinful way is God's attempt to lovingly bring us back into compliance (Lamentations 3:31-33).

## **Suffering Comes From Living In A Sinful World**

So, it makes perfect sense that sin brings sorrow. But one can experience sorrow apart from personal sin. Just ask Jesus. Even the Faithful One was not immune to the suffering sin unleashes.

This seems to be the case with Job's sorrow.

Let's consider what the Scripture tells us about Job. Job was a blessed man. In a time when few children would live to adulthood, He had seven sons and three daughters. He also had tremendous wealth and possessions. Job was prosperous in every way. And you remember what Jesus said about rich people. He warned his disciples that it was easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a sewing needle

than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is not a large leap to assume that this fact was as true in Job's day as it was in Jesus's. But Job had somehow beaten the odds. Scripture calls him a blameless and upright man. Can you imagine how good you have to be to achieve that acclaim from the Bible? After all, this is the place where pastors find material for all those sermons on sin. And yet he suffered.

Even those held in the highest regard in Scripture suffer under sin's impact. Joseph was not perfect but held in high regard by Scripture. Yet, he had relationship struggles with his brothers. David was not perfect, but he became the standard by which all other kings were measured. And still, his relationships with his family and, later, his king frustrated him. Jesus was perfect. And yet, he experienced death both as an observer and a participant.

The actions of Adam and Eve did not simply impact the first couple. The consequences of what happened there changed our species and the creation we inhabit, echoing down to us today. Once they encounter God in their fallen state, we see another layer of consequences for their actions. As we will see, these struggles lead to sadness.

### *Relational Isolation*

The quiet of the Garden was interrupted by the sound of God walking among his creation. And then came a question that must have pierced Adam's soul. "Where are you?" The man and the woman had separated themselves from God behind a feeble shield of foliage. "I heard the sound of you in the garden," Adam admits, "and I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself." Where there had

been communion, now there is isolation. Sin has created a breach between God and humanity, replacing intimacy with separation.

We see this pattern again and again in Scripture. As the inhabitants of the northern tribes were being conquered by the brutal Assyrian forces, the people stopped calling on the pagan deities of the land and began calling on the God of Jacob. But their pleas fell on deaf ears. Why did God separate himself from them? He didn't. But their sins did. Listen to the response of God through Isaiah; "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). Like an abused and abandoned spouse, God justly refused to enable their adulterous affairs with the false gods of the land. Sin separates us from God.

But the consequences of sin extended beyond their vertical relationship with God. It also affected their horizontal relationship with other humans (or, maybe it is better to say "with the other human." Sometimes, we think that negotiating the complexity of human relationships is easier when communities are smaller. This is not true. Small-town life is not an answer to the toxicity of human nature. Here, we have a community of only two. But faced with the pressure of the tense moment, they become adversaries. It was, in point of fact, the real first world war!

"Who told you that you were naked?" (Genesis 3:11) God inquires. This would be a fine time for some personal responsibility. But our sinful, selfish nature impedes that level of honesty. I have often wondered, considering what we know about the nature of God, how might have things turned out if Adam had admitted his sin at that moment

and asked for forgiveness. Sadly, this is not what happened. Instead, he blames the woman. “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Genesis 3:12). Remember, on the day she was made, Adam declared, she is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. But now he distances himself far from her. And I’m sure that it did not escape God’s notice that Adam also included who had made the woman in his explanation. It’s as if Adam says, “This is ultimately your doing, God.”

This reaction to sin is not limited to the first sinners. Thousands of years separate us from this moment, but little has changed. We still refuse to accept personal responsibility for the things we have done. We instead blame the influence of the people around us (parents, siblings, spouses, and society itself). Because of sin, we are naturally inclined toward self-interest, often at the expense of those we love. Conflict, jealousy, and rivalry replace trust and mutual respect.

Scripture acknowledges the toxicity of sin as it extends deep into our relationships. Addressing the conflicts between believers in his day, James rhetorically questioned his readers

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (James 4:1-4)

Similarly, Paul tells us that works of our fallen flesh include “hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders.” And like James, Paul warns us that these tendencies to separation between human beings ultimately serve to further separate us from God. “Those who practice such things,” he cautions, “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).

Just as Adam and Eve’s connection suffered, so does every human relationship when it becomes marked by self-interest, jealousy, and distrust. Their broken relationship with each other prefigures the human tendency to separate, tribalize, and ultimately turn on one another. And what is the impact of this isolation? More sadness. As we will discuss in a future chapter, Isolation is a key factor in depression. It becomes a self-perpetuating cycle. Sadness incites us to be alone. Isolation, in turn, fosters loneliness and even deeper layers of sorrow.

### *Physical Frustration*

After he had finished his creative work, God had taken a step back to evaluate his efforts. Genesis allows a glimpse of pride in its most justified form. “Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Like you, I have sometimes dealt with individuals who have a perfectionist tendency. They are very hard to please. God doesn’t have a perfectionist tendency. He is the very embodiment of perfection. And still, he looks at creation and says, “That’s really good!” How good does something have to be for God to give it his highest stamp of approval?



Before the fall, the creation yielded its fruit willingly. And the human body worked as it was intended. But after the fall, the perfect harmony of creation was disrupted. Nothing occurred without labor.

The fall redefined the relationship humans would have with God's creation. To the woman, God warned, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing. In pain you shall bring forth children" (Genesis 3:15-16). God next turns his attention to the ground on which they stand. Speaking to Adam, God said, "Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain, you shall eat of it all the days of your life" (3:16-17). These two curses directly strike at God's original design for humanity. Before the fall, the first couple was instructed to do two things—tend to the ground and be fruitful and multiply. These two impulses define much of what makes us human—a biological imperative to propagate and an inborn desire to contribute to our environment. God's commands and the impulses he placed within us did not go away at the fall. They have only been made more difficult. Sin introduced a brokenness that permeates the very fabric of what it means to be human. So, if you have ever felt like the universe is working against you, you're not wrong. And as a result, we experience seasons of depression over present and past losses. And we experience anxiety over present and future outcomes.

In Job's story, Satan had leveraged all the broken parts of creation to create maximum injury. And the result was intense sorrow.

Let's pause for a moment and consider, what is God doing here? Why must every element of creation "groan together in the pains of childbirth until now?" (Romans 8:2) Why

should the physical world suffer because of humanity's rebellion? God did not lie, in the day they ate the fruit, the man and the woman experienced a spiritual death. Being dead to that world, you and I have no sensory perception of it. So graciously, God repurposed our physical world (which we can see) to reflect the spiritual world (which we cannot see). So the thorns and thistles referenced by God are more than obstacles to physical work; they are visible signs of an invisible reality. The struggle and pain imposed by God is not only a punishment but a signpost. As humanity labors and toils, we are reminded that we cannot thrive apart from God's grace and provision. But our frustration in this world performs another important task. It leaves us unfulfilled with this life and looking for a day when there will be "no more curse" (Revelation 22:3).

### *Mortal Termination*

As the weight of God's judgment settled over Eden, Adam and Eve stood at the threshold of a reality they had never known. They were no longer the innocent beings they once were, and with this loss, everything familiar around them now carried a sense of sorrow. God's words echoed with a finality they could not escape, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" (Genesis 3:22). God then interrupted himself and immediately drove them from Eden. He set cherubim with a flaming sword to guard the tree of life, forever closing the path to eternal life in their fallen state. And as they left the only home they had known, each step away from the garden carried them closer to something they had not previously known. Death.

It's true that Scripture tells us, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). We recognize this truth as a fundamental part of the human experience. Each of us sins, and each of us faces death. But we must be cautious about how we understand this relationship. We often see death as a cosmic inevitability, as though death were a natural law that governs God Himself: "Things that sin die." This perspective subtly implies that God is subject to a rule outside of Himself. However, this is a grave misunderstanding. God is not beholden to any force or principle greater than Himself. The link between sin and death exists by the sovereign will of God. He decreed that sin would lead to death. Death is not a rule God must obey; it is the consequence He has chosen to apply to sin. And He chose death for a reason. Death is not simply a penalty it is a path.

In the center of Eden, God placed the tree of life, an instrument of His sustaining grace for Adam and Eve. They did not possess inherent immortality; their eternal life was a gift that depended on their continued relationship with God. By partaking of the tree, they received nourishment and vitality, reinforcing their dependence on God's provision. Their immortality, then, was not a built-in feature of their nature. It was a condition sustained by their trust in God and obedience to His commands. As long as they walked in faith and followed His will, the tree of life would grant them continued access to a life untainted by decay and death. Humanity's life was always meant to be intertwined with faith and reliance on their Creator.

From the beginning, God intended for Adam and Eve to live forever—not simply as isolated beings but in constant, intimate fellowship with Him. God's plans reflect

His nature, which is permanent and unchanging. You and I are temporary beings who act with temporary effect. Everything we do ends, everything that we build decays. But as an eternal being, God acts with eternal effect. And as an eternal being, He seeks relationships that endure, grounded in love and faithfulness. If God desired eternal life for humanity, why then did He separate Adam and Eve from the tree of life? Did He suddenly regret His creation, as if they had become defective products? Certainly not. If God had truly wanted to be rid of humanity, He could have ended their existence as easy as we strike Command Z on a keyboard (that is the hotkey for “Undo” and is quite useful for those of us who make mistakes on the regular). But God did not execute this option. Why? If their death was the remedy to his problem, it would be easy enough. Why then did he choose to allow them to linger and languish outside the Garden?

From the vantage point of those destined to die, death is a source of intense grief, a painful reminder of our own vulnerability and separation. But from the perspective of God, death has a different hue. In fact, Scripture says that “precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints” (Psalm 116:15). I have stood beside many caskets and held the hands of countless grieving loved ones. And in those moments it’s hard to imagine anything less precious. What’s going on?

While we see only the sorrow of separation, God sees something entirely different. Unlike us, He views life and death through the lens of eternity. Trapped in our temporal existence, blind to the fullness of the eternal world, we can scarcely understand this perspective. And yet, His view of

death must be far more accurate than ours.

While death is indeed a consequence of sin, it also carries a merciful purpose. Imagine a world in which people live forever but remain trapped in a state of perpetual sin, pain, and separation from God. Eternal life, under those conditions, would not be a gift but a curse. By banishing them from the tree of life, God was sparing them—and all humanity—from a fate far worse than death. Death is indeed a judgment on sin, but at times judgment is the greatest form of God's grace. Death, paradoxically, provided a means to escape the pain of a broken world and allowed humanity to look forward to something better.

To God, death is precious because it brings His saints closer to His presence.

The book of Revelation describes a time when humanity once again attains a form of immortality, but this time for those living under judgment, it becomes a curse. They seek death but cannot find it, revealing that eternal life without God would be an endless torment. By allowing death to enter the world, God provided an escape from unending separation and paved the way for ultimate reconciliation with Him. Through Christ's own death and resurrection, we're assured that death is merely a passage, a threshold into a future where sorrow and suffering will be no more. Paul announced that death has lost its sting (1 Corinthians 15:55), and in this we find comfort. You and I are destined for a day when death itself will be swallowed up in victory, and our joy will be complete.

In the years that followed their exile from Eden, Adam and Eve watched as their children grew, as the earth bore fruit

through their toil, and as the world outside the garden took shape. But sorrow would soon cut deeper than they could have imagined. One day, word came that Abel, their second son, lay lifeless in a field, struck down by his own brother, Cain. Grief and confusion surely washed over them as they looked upon Abel's still body, not just the first dead person they had seen but the first dead person anyone had seen, ever. In that moment, the consequences of living in a sinful world must have become more tangible than ever. And as the years passed, they would have become increasingly aware of their own fading strength, the ache in their bones, and the graying of their hair. They watched, helpless, as their bodies slowed, each day bringing them closer to the earth from which they had been formed.

Like Adam and Eve, Job encountered the relentless reality of mortality in a world marred by sin. In the span of a single day, he lost his children, his wealth, and his security. Not long after, he found his own health shattered, his body covered with painful sores. Death loomed over him, and he sat in the ashes, grappling with profound loss and the fragile nature of life. For Job, like for the first man and woman, suffering served as a stark reminder that this life is painfully temporary.

Yet even amid his devastation, Job's faith anchored him. He clung to the hope that transcended his current suffering. "For I know that my Redeemer lives," he declared with conviction, "and at the last He will stand upon the earth" (Job 19:25). Job looked beyond his present agony, trusting that God's redemptive power will one day restore all that has been lost.

## Conclusion

When thinking about Job's story and what it means, we must remember that, so far as we know, Job never knew about that day in heaven when the sons of God were gathered. He never knew about the conversation God started or why God brought up Job's name to begin with. He never knew why. From our vantage point, we apparently know more than he ever did. And still we have questions. This is a consequence of being "not God." And being "not God" is a state we will have to learn to live with. Trying to be something other than "not God" is how we arrived in our current predicament.

Some assume that when we get to Heaven, we will have all our questions answered. Scripture does clearly indicate that when we arrive in heaven we will exist in a "glorified" state. But even this much exalted existence will be a "not God" state. The Bible never promises that we will have our questions answered, only our tears wiped away by the one who promised that "for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). In Revelation 22, we see a vision of the restored creation, where the tree of life reappears, offering healing to the nations and marking the end of every curse. This scene completes the story that began in Eden, as God brings humanity back to a state of unbroken fellowship with Him. In this new creation, the separation introduced by sin is erased, and life flourishes under God's loving rule. Jesus Himself assures us, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). In this way, Scripture paints a picture of hope that moves beyond the sorrows of our

pain, and the finality of the grave, where life is restored and God's original intention for humanity is fulfilled.

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells the story of God's plan for redemption, a plan that transforms humanity's experience of death into a doorway to eternal life.

Though death entered the world through Adam, marking a path of sorrow and separation, God provided a way back to Himself through Jesus Christ. What began as a sentence of death for sin is met with a promise of new life.

So, the Christian hope lies not in evading the struggles of life, or even the end of life, but in conquering it through the One who has already triumphed over the grave.



## Chapter 3

### Coping With Sadness: Guiding the Body

When we think about improving our emotional health, we often focus on the big things—significant life changes, deep spiritual practices, or shifts in our thinking. But sometimes, the most potent transformations start with small practical adjustments to our environment. You might be thinking, *That doesn't seem very spiritual.* And you're right—it's not spiritual in the way we often define it. But the spirit within you is deeply connected to other parts of who you are—your mind, body, and surroundings. External factors impact your inner life far more than we often realize.

Let's test that idea. I have two questions for you. First, how are you right now? Are you doing well? Struggling? As a child, I remember my father answering this question by saying, *"Finer than frog's hair."* How would you respond?

Now, here's the second question: Why do you feel that way?

If you're not doing well, what's the cause? Chances are,

your answer has something to do with external circumstances—your environment. And if you are doing well, how would your mood change if your car broke down today? What if that strange noise from your refrigerator led to an expensive repair? What if that nagging pain in your chest turned out to be something serious? Or what if those whispers of layoffs at work became a reality?

It's easy to attribute these feelings to purely mental or spiritual issues. And then attempt to “will ourselves” into feeling better. But what if the problem isn't just inside us—what if it's also around us?

We like to believe we're disciplined enough to rise above our environment and that external circumstances don't dictate our inner state. But let's be honest: that's not how we're wired. Our environment matters. Imagine trying to light a match in a storm. No matter how carefully you strike it, the wind and rain will snuff it out before it can catch fire. But that exact match can ignite a blazing flame in a dry, calm place. The same is true for our emotional well-being. Our physical and relational environment can profoundly affect our efforts to spark hope and joy.

Scripture presents a holistic view of our emotional health. It shows us that the state of our body, our environment, and the quality of our relationships intertwine with our spiritual and mental health. As we discussed in Chapter 1, seasons of sadness are not simple things. They are like storms with layers of variables coming together to form the clouds and prompt the wind and rain. Our mind is not isolated from our bodies and environment. They constantly interact with

the world outside—the sights, sounds, and even the people filling our days. And like water flowing through a garden, the environment can either nourish our spirits or drain them dry.

Elijah bursts onto the pages of Scripture in dramatic form. There's no lengthy introduction, no lineage, no background story. He simply appears, boldly announcing before the king: "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (1 Kings 17:1). The imagery is vivid: a lone prophet standing before a powerful king, daring to declare divine judgment. We know little about him at this point—only his name and his origin, Tishbe. But his words reverberate with authority, leaving no doubt that Elijah believed he was serving a higher King.

Under King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, the people of Israel had drifted far from God. It seemed that everyone had embraced the worship of Baal. The people believed that Baal controlled the fall of the rains and the growth of the harvests. However, authenticity is not the measure of truth, and God used Elijah to prove this belief false.

It isn't easy to discern tone and emotion from written accounts. Still, when I envision Elijah's voice, standing on top of Carmel, praying for fire to fall from heaven, I imagine someone speaking with certainty and unwavering focus. And, at least in that moment, one can see that his confidence isn't rooted in himself or his circumstances but in the living God.

Elijah had good reason for this confidence in the Lord. Elijah's life was packed with proof that he was not alone. God

worked for and through him. By the time we arrive at the very familiar story of his battle with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, he has experienced numerous miracles. By Elijah's voice, God had caused a drought to fall on the land. As others suffered from hunger and thirst, Elijah was led to a brook where God used birds to deliver his daily rations. Once the brook dried up, God directed him to a house occupied by a widow and her son. There, the three of them lived by drawing their daily needs from a jar of grain that never emptied and a jug of oil that never ran dry. Finally, when the woman's son died, God used Elijah to raise the boy back to life. And then there was the miracle at Carmel, where God vaporized a saturated sacrifice with fire from heaven.

But immediately after this victory, the narrative takes a startling turn. Elijah, who, keep in mind, has just witnessed one of the most dramatic displays of God's power in history, flees for his life. Queen Jezebel, enraged by the slaughter of the prophets of Baal, sent a message to Elijah: "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow" (1 Kings 19:2). By this, she, of course, means dead. Her threat cut through Elijah's confidence like a knife. Despite all he has seen God accomplish, fear overtakes him. He ran into the wilderness, left his servant behind, and collapsed under a broom tree.

I have never been threatened in this way, so I want to show grace here. But as an outsider, I have to wonder what he really had to fear.

- Social harm? Elijah was obviously a polarizing individual by the time he fled from Jezebel. Those who saw him favorably were not going to be swayed by the ranting of such

a wicked political figure. Could her rants really assault his character?

- Bodily harm? Elijah had witnessed God's supernatural protection first-hand. He was led to places of security and then saw his needs provided in ways that were undeniably divine. Could Jezebel override God's protection?

- Loss of life? Jezebel had made her intentions clear. She did not seek to injure Elijah's reputation or wound his body. She meant to take his life. Our own conflicts will almost never rise to this level. But let's assume Jezebel could make good on her threat. So what! Elijah himself had witnessed first-hand God's ability to overcome death as he stretched himself out over the deceased body of the widow's son. Assuming that she could get close enough to him, could she kill him in such a way so that God could not redeem his life?

Jezebel was no real threat. But the truth is, most of what we fear never materializes. Pause for a moment and think about a recent conflict in your life. Which of these potential harms did you actually face? How many of these fears were reasonable? Given what Elijah had seen, his emotionally charged response seems unnecessary.

Apparently, spiritual victories do not make us immune to spiritual valleys. In fact, often, the former seems to flow seamlessly into the latter. Elijah had experienced a great victory on Mount Carmel. He had boldly confronted the prophets of Baal, and God had miraculously demonstrated His power by consuming the offering Elijah had prepared. This event was a high moment for Elijah, a pinnacle of his prophetic career. But high moments in life don't last forev-

er. In fact, they often don't last long.

The wedding day is a high moment, full of joy and celebration. But marriage itself can be challenging, requiring ongoing effort and commitment.

Graduation is a high moment, marking the achievement of years of hard work. Yet, the job that follows can bring its own set of challenges and stressors.

Winning a game is a high moment, but preparing for the next game can be demanding and difficult.

These high experiences can create a temporary sense of euphoria. And when the euphoria fades, we may feel a sense of emptiness or letdown. This gap between the high moment and the return to ordinary life can lead to feelings of sadness and depression.

But there is another type of gap we should watch out for: the gap between our expectations and our reality. Elijah likely expected that the victory on Mount Carmel would lead to a significant turning point for Israel. He might have envisioned a national revival, with the people turning back to God and abandoning their idolatry. But this expectation was unmet. Despite everything God had accomplished through him, Elijah saw no lasting change in the hearts of the people or the nation's leadership.

Unmet expectations can turn difficulties into depression. When the outcomes we hope for don't materialize, it's easy to question the purpose of our efforts—or even our worth. The gap between our career plan and our job path, between our hopes for a relationship and its reality, between our spiritual efforts and their visible impact—these unfulfilled expectations can weigh heavily on our hearts. And

many wander for years, lost in the voids between what was planned and what came to be.

Now, to be sure, ambition is a natural part of God's design for humanity. Nobody sets out to fell or accomplish nothing. But reality is rarely able to keep pace with imagination. Like Elijah, we all want peace, to create utopia here and now. We yearn for a moment when the struggle ends, when our dreams align perfectly with our realities. We search for a place where our efforts yield the results we envision and creation no longer fights back (Genesis 3:14-19). Yet, life on this side of eternity rarely affords such resolution. This is one way God keeps us unsatisfied with this broken world and looking, instead, toward a new home:

Therefore, let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. (Hebrews 13:13-15)

Unfortunately, in this life, we will never discover a plateau where we can stop climbing. But the good news is that we will never climb alone.

For Elijah, the gap between the revival he imagined and the threat he received must have felt insurmountable. It was not just disappointment he faced; it was the crushing realization that his efforts seemed futile, that the victory he had worked so hard for felt like it slipped through his fingers. And this perceived failure caused him to question his very identity. "I am no better than my fathers," he lamented (1 Kings 19:4). He viewed himself as just another failed prophet in a long line of messengers ignored by Israel. Notice

what has happened. His identity as a prophet and his sense of value became tied to the outcomes he longed to see, leaving him vulnerable to despair when those outcomes didn't materialize.

God does not call us to bear the weight of outcomes.

We must be very careful to avoid connecting our value to our effectiveness. In the parable of the talents, as told in Matthew 25, the master did not say upon his return, "Well done, my good and effective servants." Instead, he praised them for their faithfulness. This distinction is critical. Faithfulness is measured only by our trust in God and obedience to His calling, not by the visible results of our efforts. Like Elijah, we risk believing the lie that our purpose or identity is invalidated when our work doesn't yield immediate or dramatic change. But Scripture reminds us over and over that our value is rooted not in what we achieve, but in who we serve.

And fortunately, you, I, and Elijah serve a very patient and gracious God. If we do what is right, God will also do what is best. And when we find that we have not done right, that is the place where we find grace.

God's patient and gracious ministry to Elijah began under a broom tree, and in a way that defies our expectations. We might expect God to focus immediately on the spiritual—the unseen part of us. After all, isn't that where the real battle lies? (Ephesians 6:12) But God did not start with a lecture about faith or a rebuke for Elijah's fear. He didn't challenge Elijah's emotions or demand that he "snap out of it." God met Elijah where he was, ministering to his physical needs first. The God who made Elijah understands the intricate



connection between the physical and the spiritual. And if we view this story as a case study, Elijah as the patient, and God as the great physician; we can glean some practical insights for guiding our body during seasons of struggle.

## **1. God Gave Him Somewhere to Rest**

That broom tree Elijah sat under wasn't there by accident. Most translations describe this area as a wilderness. For many of us, when we hear the word "wilderness," we envision tall trees on mountains, the sound of a babbling creek in the distance, and perhaps a refreshing breeze. But that's not what Elijah was experiencing. He was in the Negev—a harsh, rocky desert. This is a barren, sun-scorched region where shade is rare, and survival is grueling. Foliage of any kind would have been limited. It would only be found only along small, temporary streams called wadis. But keep in mind, there had been no rain for years.

The broom tree was appointed by God. And it must have been a small but welcome comfort. It would have been no more than a scraggly desert shrub, but it offered a shade where the exhausted prophet could rest. God doesn't always bring us to lush green pastures or cool streams. But He provides enough. A broom tree in the wilderness isn't a grand resort, but it's sufficient for a brief rest. God's provisions are always practical, sufficient, and rarely early.

God's intentional care for Elijah in this moment reveals the importance he places on rest. Rest is often the first step in God's healing process. When we are worn thin—physically, emotionally, or spiritually—we cannot see clearly. Our problems feel insurmountable, our failures seem final, and

God's presence feels distant. In that place of exhaustion, we often don't need solutions or sermons; we need space to breathe. We need to be still and allow God to meet us in our weariness, And it was so vital that God sent an angel not once, but twice, to ensure Elijah got the sleep he needed (1 Kings 19:5-7).

From the very beginning, God built rest into the fabric of creation. He modeled it when He ceased from His work on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2-3), and He commanded it through the Sabbath—a day set apart to pause, worship, and recover. Rest is not weakness; it is wisdom.

Rest is an act of faith as well as obedience. In our routine of rest, we acknowledge that the world will not fall apart if we stop for a few moments. It recognizes our finiteness and redirects our hope from our efforts to the one who works on our behalf. This rhythm of work and rest is not optional; it is essential. Ignoring it leads to burnout, despair, and a distorted perspective of ourselves and our circumstances. Even Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, demonstrated the necessity of rest. The Gospels frequently show Him withdrawing to solitary places to rest and pray (Luke 5:16). If the Son of God—who had infinite power—needed time to recharge physically and spiritually, how much more must we?

Adequate rest is vital for mental health. Sleep helps regulate our mood, improve cognitive function, and reduce stress. On the flip side, lack of sleep can exacerbate symptoms of depression and anxiety. Especially during seasons of emotional struggle, rest is a non-negotiable part of our routine. In seasons of stress, sadness, or spiritual discouragement, we often try to “power through.” We press harder, work longer, and ignore our physical limits, hoping sheer

effort will lift the fog. But God’s care for Elijah invites us to do something counterintuitive: stop. Pause. Rest. For some of us, this might mean prioritizing sleep, recognizing that a rested body can process emotional struggles more clearly. For others, it may require setting aside time to unplug from the demands of life—whether through solitude, silence, or simply stepping away from responsibilities to allow space for recovery.

The rest God offers is not just about the absence of work, but about actively receiving His care and trusting Him with what we cannot carry alone. His invitation is gentle—“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Like Elijah, you and I will find that under God’s provision, even the smallest broom tree becomes enough for now.

## **2. God Gave Him Something to Eat**

In times of stress, our diet often suffers. We may lose our appetite entirely. This leaves us running on fumes without the energy to face the day. Others swing in the opposite direction, gravitating toward comfort foods to soothe our emotions. I have personally found that comfort food can be good therapy, but it is a terrible diet. It numbs us temporarily while leaving our bodies undernourished and ill-equipped to recover.

Elijah was awakened by an angel to find a freshly baked cake on hot stones and a jar of water (1 Kings 19:6). It wasn’t a feast or gourmet meal. But, like the broom tree, it was exactly what he needed. And then the angel delivers his message from God. The normal message of angels begins

with the words “Do not be afraid.” Why not? These are terrifyingly powerful creatures. One angel was responsible for the defeat of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers (2 Kings 19:35, Isaiah 37:36). For the record, when I envision this story, the angel is played by Keanu Reeves. This celestial warrior speaks with a much different tone from the expected “thus says the Lord!” “Arise and eat” is all he said. Elijah had drained all his resources fleeing from Jezebel. And a long journey lay ahead.

In the normal rhythms of life seeking nourishment comes natural. We do it without thinking. But seasons of stress break the rhythms of life, including diet. For this reason, to cope with sadness, we will frequently need to think intentionally about things that would normally come naturally.

Our need for nourishment is one of the most fundamental aspects of being human. The Bible, itself, frequently connects physical nourishment with spiritual well-being. God’s faithfulness to Israel as they left Egypt was shown through the provision a daily ration of manna (Exodus 16:33-34; Deuteronomy 8:3). We are told that our prayers should include a request for “our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). Jesus presents himself as the bread of life (John 6:32-35). Jesus himself, after fasting for forty days in the wilderness, was immediately ministered to by angels (Matthew 4:11). But food is not only essential for our physical nourishment. God designed it to bring us joy, a critical point for our current conversation.

“He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts”

Psalm 104:14-15).

God designed our bodies to nutritional require balance, and honoring that design is a spiritual act of stewardship. You are not just a soul with a body; you are a whole being made in the image of God—mind, body, and spirit. Proper nutrition affects our mood, energy levels, and overall emotional health. Medical studies have shown that a balanced diet, rich in essential nutrients, can improve mood and reduce the risk of depression. Nutrients such as omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins, and minerals play crucial roles in brain function and emotional regulation.

In other words, there are times when eating a good meal might be the most spiritual thing we can do. I'll pause here for an "amen" from my Baptist readers.

### **3. God Gave Him Something to Do**

When Elijah was awoken the second time, he was instructed to eat again. The angel explained the reason, "for the journey is too far." At this point we learn that Elijah was not just running away from one place, he was heading to another. Of course, we know that Elijah's real need, more than rest and refreshment, was to meet with God. And he could have done this from right there underneath the broom tree. But God allows him to continue on his journey. Forty additional days he travels on the strength of those two meals, to Mount Horeb. This location held deep significance in Israel's story. It was the place where Moses met God, where the covenant was given, and where God's very presence was revealed in dramatic ways.

Elijah was not there long. God has a very important conversation with his prophet (which we will look at next). Then he gave Elijah a series of tasks. He was to return to the area he had just traveled from, all the way back through Judah, back to Israel, and then on north to Syria. There, he would anoint Hazael as king over Syria, Jehu as king over Israel, and Elisha as his prophetic successor (1 Kings 19:15-16).

All this raises several important questions. First, why did God not deliver this instruction to Elijah while he was under the broom tree in Judah? Why let him travel forty additional miles only to have to travel forty miles back? Remember, he wasn't traveling by plane, train, or automobile. He was very likely on foot. And once he arrived at Horeb, did God really need Elijah to carry the message? Could that same angel who had brought him food not carry the anointing oils to Jehu, Hazael, and Elisha? Why involve Elijah in this transition of power at all?

He involved Elijah for the same reason why, deep down, you and I want to assemble IKEA furniture. In a paper titled "The IKEA Effect: When Labor Leads to Love," Michael I. Norton, Daniel Mochon, and Dan Ariely explore how effort invested in assembling a product enhances customer valuation of it. The researchers demonstrate that individuals place a disproportionately high value on furniture and other items they assemble themselves, even when the results are imperfect. This phenomenon has become known as the "IKEA Effect." When people contribute effort to create something, they develop a sense of ownership and pride, which increases their emotional attachment to the product. Said simply, we hold a higher value of things that we have had a hand in making.

This should not surprise us. An inborn desire for purpose and involvement was woven into God's plan for humans from the very beginning. After he had finished his creative work, God stepped back and declared everything he had made as very good. Part of this creation included a man who God placed in the middle of the Garden of Eden "to work it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). I am assuming, after all God had accomplished, he could have made grass that mowed itself, plants that pruned themselves, and fruit that picked itself. But he did not. He created a world that perfectly matched the heart of the man he had made. A man who was made in the image of a God who acted with purpose. A perfect creation was a creation that needed work. And a perfect human was made to work. God was giving his creation something to do.

The tasks God assigned Elijah were specific, actionable, and forward-looking. They reminded Elijah that God's kingdom work would continue beyond his lifetime. Sure, it would be easier if the angel swooped in with a ready-made solution, anointing kings and prophets while Elijah rested. But God wasn't just trying to get a task done; He was ministering to Elijah by mobilizing Elijah.

As I grew up, there was an old pond on the other side of the field behind our home. That was the place where my dad raised hogs. Now, let me be clear, when I say my dad raised hogs, I mean he did so by proxy through my brother and I. I later discovered for myself that delegation is a valuable resource for parenting. In the mornings before school, we would take buckets of slop back to that old pond. I was always very careful to avoid getting any of the content from those buckets on my school clothes. By this time in my

life, I had learned that the odor of hog farming was not a pheromone. The pond was fed by only a small wet weather stream and the rain that rolled off the hills around it. The water trickled into that small basin and stopped. My dad had a word for the water in that pond. It was stagnant. It was, I remember, nastier than the slop we fed to those hogs.

Depression is stagnation. It's the soul sitting still while life moves around it. Like the water in that old pond, life trickles in, pools around, and stops. Over time, it leaves behind layers of debris—disappointment, despair, and doubt. The stench of stagnation becomes a part of daily life.

This is one of the reasons why physical activity is so important. Staying active aids in maintaining mental health. Studies have shown that physical inactivity is closely linked to higher rates of depression. Individuals who sit for extended periods or avoid exercise are at a significantly higher risk for depressive symptoms. Conversely, regular physical activity can reduce stress, boost mood, and improve overall mental health. The simple act of moving our bodies—whether through walking, exercising, or engaging in physical tasks—can have a profound impact on how we feel. The Bible, itself, acknowledges the importance of caring for the gift of our physical bodies. In the Old Testament, the people received instructions about the consequences of laziness. As discussed above, in the perfect Garden of Eden, God gave Adam meaningful work. And in the New Testament, Paul reminded readers that their bodies were temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20),

I know what you might be thinking at this point, “But is fitness really a biblical issue. Show me the passage that instructs me to get thirty minutes of exercise at least three



times per week.” Fair enough there is no “Thus saith the Lord” directives on this topic. But the truth is, for those living in the ancient world, the simple act of living was a fitness routine all on its own. People did not work in office cubicles; they were outdoors. They did not sit all day at desks; they stood at forges and in workshops. They did not meet Uber drivers at the door with supper; they went to the fields. And journeys were not made in horseless chariots, but on foot. There was no need for a command to stay fit.

In Elijah’s day, regular movement was required for existence. This means we must pay particular attention to the amount of physical activity we get. Many of us today, by contrast, live largely sedentary lifestyles. We must be intentional to ensure we are staying active, especially when we’re struggling emotionally. We honor God and benefit ourselves by taking care of our physical health. Whether it’s a walk outside, a workout, or even light stretching, getting our bodies moving can help us regain a sense of control and improve our mood.

When Elijah sat under the broom tree, he wasn’t moving either. His life felt drained, his hope evaporated, and his purpose seemed lost. Yet God stirred him to action. Movement was part of God’s prescription for Elijah. And it can be a big help for us in our times of emotional stress. Stagnation can begin to break when a purpose stirs our heart. Remember, sometimes God’s work in us involves God’s work through us. A trickle of God’s grace flowing through you can turn the still waters of your soul back into streams of renewal.

#### **4. God gave him someone to help**

We have already discussed our tendency to isolate. But this tendency is exaggerated during seasons of emotional struggle. Immediately after Elijah began his spiral into despair, he isolated himself. He left his servant behind and ventured into the wilderness alone (1 Kings 19:3-4).

We see this same reaction play out in the story of Naomi in the book of Ruth. Naomi had experienced tremendous loss. When she and her family left Bethlehem for the greener pastures of Moab, her life was full. Dreams of better days must have filled her mind. But at some point, that all fell apart. Her husband and both her sons died in Moab. She had nothing left but three ossuary boxes containing the remains of her previous life. With nothing left for her in Moab, she decided to return home to Bethlehem. As she departed, her daughters-in-law pleaded to accompany her. Naomi initially resisted, urging them to remain in Moab where their families and futures lay. But ultimately, Ruth's insistence won out with a sacred covenant; "Where you go," she promised Naomi, "I will go; and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). When Naomi arrived in Bethlehem, she was immediately recognized. The years had not masked her identity. "Can this be Naomi," someone asked (Ruth 1:20).. In Hebrew, her name meant "pleasant." But the title given to her by her parents now felt out of place; so, she rebranded herself. "Do not call me Naomi;" she insisted, "call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me" (Ruth 1:20).

Now, pause and consider what she has done. Naomi's responses to her loss reveal a pattern of withdrawal. When she left Moab, she wasn't really heading for home. She

was fleeing an uncomfortable situation. When she insisted her daughters-in-law stay behind, she wasn't urging them to be practical. She was secluding herself. And when she announced her name change, she wasn't simply changing how she should be addressed, she was defining herself by her loss. We can find these same patterns in the life of Elijah. He fled from the uncomfortable situation in the north. He secluded himself by leaving his servant behind on the journey. And, as we discussed above, he redefined his identity based on his loss. "I am," he declared, "no better than my fathers" (1 Kings 19:4).

Community is a cornerstone of strength, particularly in times of trouble. Throughout the Bible, God gives emphasis to the value of mutual support and encouragement among his people. During times of stress and persecution, we are told that the early church "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Similarly, Hebrews 10:24-25 encourages some believers, who were suffering greatly for their faith, to "consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." In the presence of shared challenges, such connections foster resilience, providing emotional and spiritual support. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 states, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!" And as we saw in a previous chapter, even Jesus sought the company of others during critical moments in His ministry. In the garden of Gethsemane, as the weight of the cross loomed, He took Peter,

James, and John with Him, asking them to stay and pray (Matthew 26:36-38).

The tactic of a predator is always to isolate a weaker, exhausted prey. And if the Bible is true, there is an enemy who seeks “to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). Secluding us from others feeds right into his plan. He often uses it to create within us a subtle heart of self-righteousness. When Elijah arrived at Mount Horeb, God began a conversation by asking him, “What are you doing here. God had not been left out of the loop on recent events. He knew what Elijah was doing there. But it was important that Elijah spoke the words. Once words are spoken, they commit us to a course of action, to a truth. Even when words lie, they still tell a truth. “I have been very zealous for the Lord,” he declared. And what had it gotten him? Nothing it seemed! It wasn’t fair. He expected, and deserved, better. He had fared no better than his ancestors at forcing people to change. What was the point? Elijah felt that he stood all alone. In fact, he was the only one left on earth who still followed God. Let’s pause for a moment and assess what his words reveal about what he is saying. If Elijah was the only one on earth left who still followed the Lord, that would make him the most holy man on earth. Elijah had interpreted the state of the world based on the narrow sample set of his own experience. He was the only one who remained faithful. He was totally alone. But he had forgotten about Obadiah (1 Kings 18:3). He forgot about the one hundred prophets he had hidden (1 Kings 18:4). And he knew nothing about the seven thousand, Just in the northern tribes of Israel alone, who had never bowed a knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18). Elijah’s perspective had been skewed by his isolation, leading him to believe that his experience

represented reality. And the result was a toxic mixture of self-pity and pride.

### **In, By, & For Community**

**Made by Community:** The creation of man began with God talking to himself; “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). The words “us” and “our” clue us in on the fact that the God of the Bible is a dynamic being of multiple persons. Christianity has come to refer to this idea as the doctrine of the Trinity. As Scripture reveals the nature of God, we are introduced to these persons within the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Inside the nature of God himself is revealed a community.

**Made in Community:** The creation of humanity was unique among all of God’s creative acts. God fashioned man with his own hands, whereas all other things were made through the vibrating resonance of his voice. And after mashing and molding man, God placed his face over the face of this being and exhaled life into him (Genesis 2:7).

**Made for Community:** God designed humanity with a built-in need for community. After God fashioned the first man, he placed him in a lush garden to work it and keep it. He also gave man one simple rule regarding a forbidden tree (we all know how that one turned out). And then God announced “It is not good. . .” We will return to this sentence in just a moment. For now, let’s consider what is happening here. At each stage of creation, God paused and held his work to a divine quality control test. With the exception of one item, everything was good. And the one

feature of creation that was not declared “good” was found to be “very good.” Of course everything was good! Why would it not be? The convergence of limitless power and limitless knowledge could do no less than good. Except for apparently he did. “It is not good for man to be alone.” How could God make something and then find it “not good?” What went wrong? Nothing. Man was built with an intentional design deficiency. Why would such an exercise be necessary?

In an ironic twist, only those deprived of a thing can really appreciate its value. Only those who have experienced hunger can appreciate the value of a meal. Only those who have experienced thirst can appreciate the value of water. Only those who have experienced real poverty can appreciate the value of wealth. And only those who have experienced real oppression can appreciate the value of freedom. God want’s Adam to value his relationship, his need for community. So, he is made without one. He serves an entire day, naming each of the creatures God had made, this nagging loneliness revealing that he had “no helper fit for him.” It was then and only then that God caused Adam to fall asleep. Once the first man was prepped for surgery, God fashioned the woman, and the first community was born. Adam’s assessment upon seeing her tells us everything we need to know, “Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Ge 2:23–24).

We imagine our species has changed greatly since that garden, but little has actually changed. It is still “not good

for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). So, he sends us help. To Naomi he sent Ruth. To Elijah, he sent Elisha. Who has he sent to you?

When God calls us out of stagnation, He often does so by calling us into relationship. Elisha’s presence would serve as a tangible reminder that the mission was never Elijah’s alone—it belonged to God, and He was already raising up others to carry it forward. For us, too, God’s provision often comes through a friend who listens, a mentor who challenges, or a faith community that encourages us.

## **Conclusion**

God meets us in our humanity. When we think about improving our emotional health, we often believe the solution requires monumental change. But God’s care for Elijah shows us a different path. The answers, in part, often lie in small, practical adjustments. Finding places to rest, nourishment to sustain us, tasks to focus our hearts, and people to share the journey; these can all be valuable contributions to finding hope in our hard place. These approaches to mental health may not seem overtly spiritual at first, but they reveal how deeply God understands the connection between our spirit, mind, body, and environment.

## Chapter 4

### Coping With Sadness: Guarding the Mind

In a recent article titled “America’s Top Export May Be Anxiety,” Derek Thompson explained how our modern society has created a global surge in anxiety and depression. He identifies three interconnected trends fueling this crisis: diagnostic inflation, prevalence inflation, and negativity inflation.

First, diagnostic inflation refers to the growing list of mental health disorders identified in the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). While the 1952 edition listed around 100 disorders, the latest version includes nearly 300. Psychiatrist Allen Frances warned that this expansive medical vocabulary risks labeling ordinary human experiences as illnesses, creating what he calls the “worried well.” These are people who unnecessarily pathologize their everyday anxieties, which contributes to a culture of over-diagnosis.

Second, prevalence inflation describes how constant ex-



posure to mental health terminology in traditional and social media mediums amplifies the perception of widespread mental illness. Psychologists Lucy Foulkes and Jack Andrews suggest that this continuous messaging can lead individuals to interpret routine, emotional struggles as evidence of deeper psychological problems. As people hear repeatedly that anxiety and depression are common, they may start seeing normal feelings through a pathological lens.

Finally, negativity inflation highlights how American news media has become more pessimistic over the decades. Machine learning studies reveal a sharp increase in negative language in news coverage since the 1970s, which has accelerated dramatically by 2020 and beyond. This pervasive negativity exacerbates feelings of helplessness and despair.

In today's fast-paced world, anxiety, and emotional distress often feel amplified by the culture around us. Yet, these struggles are not unique to our time. Across history, individuals have faced overwhelming burdens and found ways to persevere. The Apostle Paul stands as a striking example of this.

The Apostle Paul is one of the most compelling figures in the New Testament. His life, transformation, and ministry epitomize the power of God to redeem and repurpose even the most unlikely individuals. As an apostle to the Gentiles, Paul combined rigorous intellectual reasoning with fervent faith to communicate the Gospel. He wrote a significant portion of the New Testament. He became an ambassador for reconciliation among feuding cultures and commu-

nities. And these letters have stood the test of time. His carefully crafted prose timelessly blends personal testimony, theological insight, and practical advice for Christian living. Through the power of the Spirit, he was so in tune with the human psyche that his writings are relevant some two thousand years later.

His accomplishments as a follower of Christ are even more impressive when considering where he started.

Originally named after Israel's first king, Saul began life in Tarsus, a prosperous city in the Roman province of Cilicia (modern-day Turkey). Tarsus was a center of learning and culture. He was exposed to Hellenistic influences even as he grew up in a devout Jewish household. This allowed him to relate well to both Jews and Greeks. Saul received his religious education in Jerusalem under the esteemed rabbi Gamaliel. Gamaliel was one of the most respected teachers of Jewish law. Under his tutelage, Saul became well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, the oral traditions of Judaism, and rigorous theological debate. Saul was identified as a Pharisee and a member of a Jewish sect known for strict adherence to the Law of Moses. He described himself as “a Hebrew of Hebrews” and “blameless” in his observance of the law (Philippians 3:5-6). As a Roman citizen, Saul enjoyed uncommon privileges for Jews in his time, including protection under Roman law and the freedom to travel. This unique dual identity—a devout Jew with Roman citizenship—would later play a critical role in his ministry.

As a rising star among the Pharisees, his zeal for the Jewish law defined his early career. His fervent desire to protect Judaism from perceived threats led him to view the early Christian movement, known as “The Way,” as a dangerous

heresy. These Christians proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, a claim Saul found blasphemous. The idea of a crucified Messiah directly contradicted Jewish expectations of a victorious, kingly deliverer. Determined to eradicate this sect, Saul became a prominent persecutor of Christians. The Book of Acts records that Saul was present at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Stephen's bold witness made a deep impression on the early Church, but it hardened Saul's resolve. He "approved of [Stephen's] execution" (Acts 8:1) and took on the role of a ruthless enforcer. Saul launched a systematic campaign to suppress Christianity. Acts 8:3 describes how he "ravaged the church," going from house to house to arrest Christians and throw them in prison. Later, Saul's campaign extended beyond Jerusalem. He sought official authorization from the high priest to pursue Christians as far as Damascus, a city in Syria where the movement had begun to take root. Armed with letters granting him authority to arrest followers of Jesus, Saul set out for Damascus with the single-minded goal of crushing this growing threat. And it was in that place, on that mission, that God called him to service:

"And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." (Acts 9:4-6)

Suddenly, the passion that fueled Saul's persecution of Christians became the driving force behind Paul's mission to spread the Gospel. This turning point illustrates the heart of the Gospel: no one is beyond redemption. He uses what seems broken or misguided for His glory by empow-

ering individuals to fulfill a greater divine purpose. God's grace is free, but his calls cost.

If anyone had cause for emotional distress, Paul certainly did. His transformation came with a cost that few would be willing to bear. He had many reasons to experience anxiety. Paul carried a deep burden for the well-being of the churches he established (2 Corinthians 11:28). He often wrote about his anxiety over their spiritual health and his distress over false teachings, divisions, and moral failures among believers. Paul had a heart for missions and a strong desire to reach places like Rome and Spain with the Gospel (Romans 15:23-24). Yet, he frequently faced barriers and delays—like imprisonment—that thwarted his plans. The tension between his desires and his circumstances could have contributed to feelings of frustration or disillusionment. And throughout his ministry, Paul was aware of his mortality and the looming threat of death (Philippians 1:21-23). The knowledge that his mission could cost him his life, coupled with the relentless demands of his calling, could have easily triggered existential struggles and bouts of crippling fear.

But if anxiety tugged at his attention, depression must have demanded it: Paul endured relentless physical suffering: beatings, stonings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, hunger, and sleepless nights (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). These recurring, harsh conditions could wear down anyone's spirit. Paul faced rejection not only from opponents outside the Church but also from within. He was often met with suspicion and hostility, even from fellow Christians who were wary of his past as a persecutor of the Church (Acts 9:26). Paul speaks of a "thorn in the flesh," a persistent struggle

that caused him great distress (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). While the exact nature of this thorn is unknown, it was something that humbled him and caused continuous struggles, both physically and emotionally. His prayers for its removal went unanswered, which could have led to feelings of despair or inadequacy. Finally, Paul often worked alone, and his letters reveal moments of intense loneliness (2 Timothy 4:9-16). He speaks of companions deserting him and being left to stand alone, especially during trials.

Perhaps the most significant cause for emotional distress would be his memories. It is unfortunate how sticky memories are, especially those we would like to shed. I imagine his past as a persecutor haunted him (1 Timothy 1:13-15). I wonder, how many times did images of Stephen's shattered skull flash across his mind? Were there times he could still feel the weight of those coats he held as he nodded his head in compliance with this murder? How many times, when he wrote to feuding churches about forgiveness, did the words of the first martyr echo in his own ears: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). Did Paul whence at the thought that Jesus had answered Stephen's prayer by saving him, even while he was on the road to Damascus to take the life of other members of "the Way?" To be sure, Paul was a man who enjoyed the forgiveness offered through Jesus. But while forgiveness purges the penalty of sin in the providence of God, it does not erase the memory of the offense. And this was quite an offense!

With all these challenges, it would be understandable if Paul fell into despair. He had every reason for emotional distress. Yet, Paul's perception and mindset were different. He chose to focus not on his suffering but on the hope he

had in Christ. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:11-13,

“I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

This passage finds its fullest force when we consider its context. Paul was writing while under house arrest in Rome, awaiting trial before Caesar (Philippians 1:13). His life was on the line, as the outcome of his trial could very well lead to his execution. He woke up every morning to the uncertainty of his future and the constant presence of Roman guards. His physical confinement limited his ability to continue his missionary work, which was a source of deep frustration for someone so driven by his calling to spread the Gospel.

In our fallen state, we are not built for such stress. In fact, the opposite is true. You and I are actually optimized to linger in emotional struggles. I know that is not a blessing to hear. But let us examine why this is and what we can do about it. To do this, we will look at the opening lines of Paul’s second letter to the Church at Corinth. This letter contains more autobiographical information than any of Paul’s other letters. So, we are able to listen in as he discusses his deepest struggles and take note of how he processed seasons of sadness.

During his ministry, Paul’s travels took him through the province of Asia, where the weight of his mission became almost unbearable. “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure,” he later wrote to the Corin-

thians. Their burdens at that point were so heavy that he and his companions “despaired even of life.” In his heart, Paul felt the sentence of death. The man who had once been unstoppable was now crushed under the weight of his own trials. His dedication had not shielded him from suffering. Instead, it had led him into it. Many have tried to discover what exactly Paul is referring to in this passage. Apparently, the Corinthians knew, but by the will of God, we are left to only guess. It is probably better that way. This way, our understanding of God’s power is not obstructed by the specifics of Paul’s struggle. And the ambiguity allows us to see ourselves in Paul’s words.

Despite his struggles, when he writes to the Church at Corinth, he opens with these words of praise: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3). I have to confess, if I had faced the things Paul had faced, it would have been difficult for me to view God as the Father of all mercies and the God of all comfort.

What was his secret?

I’m not really a fan of western movies. But there is one exception, the *Quick and the Dead*— a western starring Sharon Stone, Russel Crowe, Gene Hackman, and a young Leonardo DiCaprio. What’s not to love? The film revolves around a gunslinger’s tournament, where quick reflexes and precision determine survival. My favorite line is probably spoken by “the Kid” (played by DiCaprio). Near the film’s end, he’s about to take on the villain, Mr. Harris, who is also his dad (I told you it was good). Everyone in the town was terrified of Mr. Harris, everyone except “the Kid.” Before the gunfight, this underdog gives a speech that opens

with these words, “The gunfight is in the head, not in the hands. The only thing that makes him invincible is because you think he is.” Now, full confession, I have seen that film at least a hundred times and there was a time in my past when I could literally quote every line. I’m not exaggerating, every single line. In fact, I haven’t seen that movie in a year and I just wrote all that straight from memory. Impressed?

Spoiler alert, “the Kid” actually loses, proving that maybe the gunfight is actually just a little in the hands (see the previous chapter). But the point still remains. Our fight with emotional distress is, largely, in the head. And in that fight, we wrestle against three tendencies. To keep things simple, let’s label them “bad,” “me,” and “now.”

## **Our Tendency is to Focus on Bad**

While in seminary, my family and I traveled to Tennessee each Christmas. We drove our 2001 Dodge Caravan the 1200 miles from North Texas to East Tennessee, stayed a week, and rushed back home. One might have thought I was Pentecostal the way I constantly prayed over it, re-baptized the radiator with water, and anointed the engine with oil. It was almost midnight on New Year’s Eve in 2007 when the engine roared and the vehicle lost power. We were halfway between Little Rock and Texarkana in a little town called Malvern. If you have never heard of Malvern, you are not alone. We coasted to a stop off a dark exit ramp. I still remember everything about that night. I got out, walked to the front of the van, and popped the hood (as one does even if he has absolutely no idea what goes on up



there). I then turned around and looked up the exit ramp. There was only darkness, with one exception. In the beam of headlights, about thirty feet ahead, lay the carcass of a dead animal. That seemed about right for the moment. No way was I fixing this. No way could I afford a repair. No way was I finding an unimpaired mechanic on New Year's Eve in Malvern, Arkansas. I turned my gaze to heaven. The sky was crystal clear, as though nothing stood between me and God. And I seethed, "God, I'm here trying to follow your will. What is going on?" We eventually made our way back to Fort Worth early the next morning. But I had to buy another vehicle, one we could ill afford. I remember these days as some of the most frustrating during my time in seminary.

I was in class on Tuesday of the following week when my phone rang. It was the pastor of our Church back in Tennessee. I figured he was calling to ask about what had happened. So I slipped out to take his call. We talked for just a few minutes when he told me that the Church had actually taken up a collection and would be mailing us a check for over three thousand dollars. It was exactly what we needed. I remember how the weight of uncertainty lifted off my shoulders. I had slid down the wall into the floor as he shared this news with me. And when we hung up, I sat there for a moment with a smile of relief on my face.

I am not one of those guys who claims God speaks to him. But there have been a few times that I am pretty sure he did. I was just about to stand up and return to class when I believe God spoke to me. It seemed like he said, "Are you grateful?" Well, of course I was! Then he asked, "Are you as grateful to me here as you were angry with me in Mal-

vern?” Ouch! I wanted to say yes, but I knew the truth. So did he, of course. There was a real difference in my passion between the two providential events.

Frustration seems like a downhill ride; gratitude is an uphill climb. And I bet I’m not alone. Our ability to rage far surpasses our capacity for gratitude. Why is this?

Some years ago, I was reading through a popular journal when this title caught my eye, “Bad is Stronger Than Good.” As a preacher, I can smell a good sermon illustration from a mile away. So, obviously, I investigated. The article was based on a paper presented by Kathleen D. Vohs and a small team of researchers. Vohs is a psychologist who specializes in human behavior. In her research, she verified what pessimists have long suspected to be true; “bad is stronger than good, as a general principle across a broad range of psychological phenomena.” In other words, humans are drawn towards things that are bad. In psychology, this is referred to as “negativity bias.” At first glance, this seems counterintuitive to all we know about ourselves. We spend a great deal of time pursuing good things—happiness, love, success, and fulfillment. But a deeper examination confirms her findings. At the time of this writing, we have just completed one of the most divisive elections in our nation’s history. More than 15 billion text messages were sent out during the campaigns. That is not a misprint. This means, if you are reading this book, you likely received a campaign text. In fact, odds are you received 50 (15 billion / 300 million). So let me ask: did you receive a single ad with a positive tone? Did anyone you know? These ads were universally negative. Why? Because bad works good.

Negative headlines sell more papers than positive head-

lines, tragic memories last longer than cheerful memories and bad news travels faster than good news. Our negative slant exerts a disproportionate influence on the way we see our world.

Think about the implications of this part of our make-up.

You host a family dinner where everyone enjoys the meal and the evening, but one dish doesn't turn out as planned. Rather than remembering the laughter and connection, you ruminate on the one culinary misstep.

You post something online and receive 50 positive reactions and one negative comment. Instead of appreciating the overwhelming support, you obsess over the single critical remark, questioning whether you should have posted at all.

After a presentation, your manager provides mostly positive feedback but also points out one area for improvement. Rather than celebrating what went well, you replay the criticism in your mind, doubting your abilities.

In each of these examples, a smaller negative variable eclipses a greater number of positive factors. And to make matters worse, the negative feelings last longer than the positive ones. Our biased perceptions become the lens through which we assign meaning. And because of our negativity bias, we are prone to focus on the bad outcomes of a situation while ignoring what is, or may eventually be, good.

If we are prone to focus on the negative more than the positive, then we will naturally linger longer in the bad times

than rejoice in the good ones. This skewed perspective can lead us to make faulty conclusions about our circumstances, ourselves, and even God's plan for our lives. When faced with adversity, negativity bias magnifies the immediate discomfort or pain, making it difficult to see beyond the moment. We fixate on the loss, the failure, or the rejection, often missing how God may be working behind the scenes to bring about something greater. This means we must be intentionally searching for the good. Paul probably had this in mind when he instructed the Church at Philippi:

... whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Philippians 4:8).

He knew, from first-hand experience, there was an inborn tendency to do the other thing. Now, this doesn't mean Paul ignored reality. He chose, instead, to center his mind on God's goodness, even amid challenges. This is exactly what Paul did to manage his struggles in Asia. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, Paul praised "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."

Notice that he is not celebrating the difficulties but rather celebrating the God who makes difficulties meaningful. Those who share in Christ's suffering can be assured that they will also share in his comfort (2 Corinthians 1:5). Through his struggles in Asia, Paul received something that he would not otherwise possess. He now had a deeper experience and understanding of God's comfort. His com-

fort reserves had been filled to the top. He could now share comfort with others.

Rather than allowing negativity to dominate his perception, Paul reframed his experiences in light of God's good purposes. While the bad may seem stronger than the good at the moment, God's goodness always prevails in the end.

## **2. Our Tendency is for Focus on Now**

The Hindenburg was a German passenger airship that tragically ended its journey on May 6, 1937, when it caught fire and crashed while attempting to land in Lakehurst, New Jersey. The airship, the largest ever built, was a symbol of German engineering and luxury travel, capable of crossing the Atlantic in just a few days. However, its use of highly flammable hydrogen gas due to helium shortages proved disastrous. The cause of the fire remains debated, but the incident resulted in the death of 36 people and marked the end of the airship era as a viable mode of transportation. The event is remembered today through the reporting of Herbert Morrison, who was working for WLS radio station in Chicago. As he witnessed the crash, he famously exclaimed, "Oh! The humanity!" Then, he declared the event to be "the worst catastrophe in the history of the world." It was a tragedy, to be sure. But was it the worst? As an event that sat right between two world wars where millions died, I think we can say it was not. However, by witnessing the event first-hand, one could understand Morrison's perspective.

We all have this tendency to catastrophize during a struggle. And if we are prone to be more impacted by what is

happening now than what comes later, we will naturally feel like the present moment will never end. And it will be difficult for us to imagine a way forward.

During a solar eclipse, as the Moon slips in front of the Sun, the dominating light of our star appears muted. Except for the corona, the cold stone surface of the Moon blocks out the vast illuminating rays of the Sun. In our sky, the Sun and Moon have the same visible footprint. But, of course, the Moon is actually 400 times smaller. And yet, despite its cold, dim inferiority, for a brief moment, it can hijack the daylight.

Of course, it is not the Moon's size that creates the illusion of dominance over the light. It is our proximity to the Moon. As the Moon transits between the Earth and the Sun, it will rest 400 times closer to us than the Sun, thus almost perfectly eclipsing the more dominant power in the sky.

And when this occurs, we never once doubt the Sun's ability to win back the daylight. Even in the darkness of eclipse totality, the blaring corona reminds observers that the dominating light radiates uninterrupted.

There are times when the light of our day is eclipsed by an unscheduled darkness. A job loss, a relationship conflict, a physical illness, perhaps even the death of a friend. The darkness in these days is real; it's palpable. For a moment, it may even block out the light of our joy and faith in God's love for us.

Other times, it may be our own actions that seem to usher in darkness. Addictive behaviors seem to separate us from the glorious light of grace, which nourishes and warms us.

As sin slips between us and the radiance of God, it may, for a moment, appear as great as God's grace, thrusting us into darkness. But it is only an illusion. Only a shadow of darkness. And the object that cast it cannot long blot out the immense source of light.

The darkness is not a result of the size of our problem, but rather, our proximity to it. No level of human struggle can block out the loving, gracious, and illuminating rays of the Father. No matter how large they may seem at the time. John tells us that "whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:20).

### **3. Our Tendency is to Focus on Me**

I was eleven when my cousin pulled into our yard on a brand-new dirt bike. He was a few years older than me. I always looked up to him, but this was a whole other level. I was enamored. A dirt bike and the freedom to go anywhere you wanted! He sat in our front yard as I asked questions, and he talked about horsepower and speed. Do you have the scene in your head? Now pause and zoom out. Think about each one of us. Think about what each of us was thinking about. He was thinking about how cool his bike was and how cool he looked on it. But I wasn't thinking about him. And I wasn't listening to him talk about the bike. I was thinking about me. I was thinking about how cool it would be if I could talk my parents into buying me a dirt bike and how cool I would look on it. There we both stood, having a conversation about the bike. But neither of us was thinking about the other. We were alone in our

thoughts together. And, no, I never talked my parents into that purchase. They were concerned that I would not be able to hold a magnifier while keeping both hands on the handlebar or something like that.

This is the irony of many advertisements. Marketing experts tap into the narcissism of humanity by prompting us to imagine how people will admire us if we own their product. But because of the narcissism of humanity, people will be far too busy thinking about themselves to admire us.

We all suffer from a subtle tendency for narcissism. And I found the best proof of this fact. While preparing for this chapter, I did a Google search for the words “How to address narcissism.” The top five search results were:

Tips for How to Deal With a Narcissist

10 Tips for Dealing with Someone’s Narcissistic Personality

How to Deal with a Narcissist: 10 Tips to Navigate Narcissism How can someone best deal with narcissists?

8 Tips for Dealing With A Narcissist

Notice, none of these results address how to deal with our own flaws, only the flaws of others. And that is narcissistic.

With our attention drawn incessantly to what is “bad” and what is “now,” we will naturally be attracted to thoughts of self over others. In the previous chapter, we discussed the importance of serving others to overcome the stagnation of depression. In the opening verses of Paul’s letter, too, we see how life turned outward and finds joy in serving others,



even in difficult times.

If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. (2 Corinthians 1:6-7)

If we are prone to be more focused on ourselves than others, we will naturally be trapped by and consumed with our own struggles. The way we combat the tendency to focus on self is by finding the blessing in serving others. Paul, sharing some concluding remarks with the Church at Ephesus, said this:

In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20:25)

Some years ago, I heard the story of Konrad Reuland. From a very young age, Konrad was showing signs of exceptional energy. At age four, he jumped out of the grocery cart. His mom could not keep up with him. When she finally did, he was hiding in a frozen food cooler. So, the Reuland family chose to harness that energy by enrolling him in youth sports leagues. He played basketball, football, and baseball. Then, at age 11, Konrad had an experience that would change his life forever. Hall of Famer Rod Carew visited his school to meet and encourage the children. The Los Angeles infielder, who had wore the number 29 throughout his career, had been Rookie of the Year in 1967 and an All-Star for 18 consecutive seasons. He was the 1977 American League MVP and the winner of seven batting titles. He was

a legend in the LA area.

Konrad met him personally. His mom remembers that the encounter was all Konrad could talk about when she picked him up from school that day:

And I remember him getting into the car when I went to pick him up, and he says, ‘Mommy! Mom! Mom! I met Rod Carew today!’ And, ‘You know, he was a pro athlete!’ And, ‘You know, I want to be a pro athlete!’ And the whole rest of the day just resonated with him talking about his meeting Rod Carew.

Later, in college, Konrad played football for two years at Notre Dame and two years at Stanford. He then played for the New York Jets, where he caught 11 passes during his first year. He was just beginning to be recognized as a rising star when a knee injury knocked him out of the sport he loved. When he finally recovered, NFL teams were reluctant to take a chance on him. But this didn’t stop Konrad from preparing for the shot he was sure would be right around the corner. He was, by all accounts, in the best shape of his life.

One day, while in the gym, Konrad climbed onto a treadmill. He had been lifting weights and was finishing up with some cardio. He had a headache. As he began to jog, Konrad felt something click behind his right eye. Paramedics had to be called. By the time he was admitted to UCLA Medical Center, EMS had diagnosed him with a major aneurysm. The next day, his mother, who had gone to the cafeteria to pick up some coffee for her son, sent him an encouraging message. Konrad replied:” I’m about to kick this thing’s butt with the help of God. He has something big in store for me.”

That was the last conversation she would have with her son. Shortly after, the aneurysm burst, and Konrad never regained consciousness. On Dec. 12, 2016, Konrad Reuland was declared brain dead at the age of 29. But that was not the end of his story.

Some months earlier, while completing a motor vehicle form, Konrad had checked a little box indicating his willingness to be an organ donor in the event of his death. Now, his heart, that powerful, healthy organ of a major league sports athlete, would save the life of another individual. His mother remembers speaking with a member of the transplant organization:” ‘Whoever gets his heart, we would like to meet them.’ And then the next thing I said was, ‘And whoever gets his heart better deserve it, because it’s a good one.’”

Not long after, somewhere across town, a call went out to the recipient at the top of the organ transplant list. That recipient, in the providence of God, just happened to be Rod Carew, the same MLB Hall of Famer who had been so instrumental in encouraging a young Konrad Reuland 18 years earlier. The heart Carew had inspired would now be the heart that saved his life. (After his diagnosis, Carew had started a foundation to further awareness and research for heart disease. The name of this foundation is the Heart of 29.)

In any community, whether it is a city of millions or a church of hundreds, we are frequently encouraged by those we have encouraged. And we are helped by those we have helped. Occasionally, God gives us a glimpse of this machinery of creation. When he does, we can clearly see what is known to be true, what Jesus shared with his disciples:

Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.” (Luke 6:38)

How can we work to combat these tendencies? First, avoid negativity whenever possible.

Paul’s life was filled with challenges that could easily have led him into a negative spiral. Yet, he consistently chose to focus on what was good, true, and praiseworthy. This mindset didn’t just come naturally; it was a deliberate choice, one that required constant effort and discipline.

Paul resisted complaining. Paul understood the power of words and thoughts. In his letter to the Philippians, he urges believers to “do all things without grumbling or disputing” (Philippians 2:14). Complaining not only reflects a negative mindset, but it also reinforces it. The more we complain, the more we convince ourselves that our situation is hopeless. Paul could have easily succumbed to complaining. After all, he was often in dire circumstances—imprisoned, beaten, and persecuted. But instead of grumbling about his situation, he chose to focus on his mission and the opportunities his challenges presented.

Paul resolved conflicts. Unresolved conflict can be a significant source of negativity, occupying our minds with thoughts of anger, bitterness, and anxiety. Paul knew this well, and he addressed it head-on in his letters. In Philippians 4:2-3, he implored two women in the Church, Euodia, and Syntyche, to agree in the Lord and encouraged others to help them find peace. He understood that unresolved conflict is like an app running in the background, draining our emotional and mental energy. It keeps us on edge,

anticipating further disputes, and can easily cloud our judgment.

Paul remained calm. Paul's life was full of situations beyond his control—his imprisonment, the threat of execution, and the challenges of leading early Christian communities from a distance. Yet, he consistently chose to remain calm and place his trust in God.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

Paul knew that anxiety could only be overcome by focusing on what he could control: his faith, his prayers, and his trust in God's plan.

Second, be positive whenever possible. We are terrible at “stopping” a bad habit. A more successful approach is to replace a bad habit with a more productive one. While avoiding negativity is crucial, it's equally important to seek and focus on the positive aspects of life actively.

Paul intentionally looked for good. His letters are filled with examples of his ability to find the silver lining in any situation. In Philippians 4:8-9, he encourages believers to focus on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable.” Even while he was imprisoned, Paul saw it as an opportunity to advance the Gospel. He didn't ignore the challenges but chose to focus on the good that could come from them. When we consciously look for the good,

even in difficult situations, we begin to shift our perspective.

Paul intentionally looked for God. Paul's ultimate source of positivity was his unwavering focus on God. "Rejoice in the Lord always," he declared, "again I will say, rejoice." (Philippians 4:4)

This joy wasn't dependent on his circumstances but on his relationship with God. He knew that no matter what happened, God was with him, guiding him and working all things for his good.

And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:28–30)

When we look for God in our circumstances, we find a reason to rejoice, even amid trials.

Paul intentionally practiced gratitude. One of the most powerful ways to cultivate positivity is through gratitude. Paul, despite his hardships, often expressed gratitude in his letters. He was thankful for the people he ministered to, the progress of the Gospel, and even the opportunities his suffering provided. Being thankful shifts our focus from what we lack to what we have, from problems to blessings.

Consider, as a closing example, the recent struggles of Celine Dion.

Suffering and struggles are not pleasant, but they can open the door to discovering true meaning in life. This is what Dion learned after her diagnosis with Stiff Person Syndrome (SPS).

When Dion first discovered her diagnosis, it was a devastating blow. The rare condition, characterized by severe muscle spasms and rigidity, began to take over her life, causing both physical pain and emotional distress. Most significantly, the disease affected her vocal cords. Dion, who is passionate about performing, was forced to cancel performances and take a step back from the public eye, which added to her sense of isolation.

Despite the physical and emotional toll of the illness, she found a new purpose in her journey. Dion shared, “No one should suffer alone.” The she continued,

A lot of people are going through things alone for many, many, many years. If I would have just stayed secretly behind, my home would have become a prison, and I would have become a prisoner of my own life. Today, I live one day at a time. The fact that I found the strength to communicate my condition with the world makes me very proud. Maybe my purpose in this life is to help others, and that is the greatest gift.”

## Chapter 5

### Grounding

In 2018, while many companies shelled out big bucks to connect with the Super Bowl's vast audience, Skittles took marketing in a totally different direction. The Mars Company brand would produce a multi-million dollar ad, and instead of showing it to Sunday's more than 100 million viewers, they would show the commercial to only one single Skittles customer. The ad campaign was called "Exclusive the Rainbow," and a high school student named Marcus Menendez from Los Angeles became the target market.

The company secured David Schwimmer, of Friends fame, to star in the ad, hired a CGI special effects team, and produced an ad tailored to one person. No need to worry about the preferences of the masses. No need to hire focus groups to create a spot with the broadest possible reach. The goal was simple. They only had to catch the attention of one.

"Every other advertiser is going out there and showing their ad to 100 million people," Matt Montei, the vice presi-



dent of fruit confections at Mars, explained, “We want to be the one brand who has the most exclusive ad in Super Bowl history.” The ad was shown to Marcus during Super Bowl 52. All the masses could do was watch Marcus enjoy the spot, tailor-made for his pleasure.

How did it go? The ad drove a 7% lift in Skittles Originals sales throughout its 5-week run and delivered 1.5 billion earned impressions.

Who are you really trying to impress? Really? A boss. A teacher. A coach. A parent. A date. For many of us, it’s all of the above. In our search for acceptance, affirmation, and acknowledgment, we cast our net before the broadest audience possible. And in the process, most of us spread ourselves thin. Running ourselves ragged, pursuing others’ definition of life excellence and career success. It’s an exhausting way of living. What if there’s a better way?

Maybe we can find one if we” chase the rainbow.”

If we allow it, others will write various and conflicting standards for our lives. But Scripture calls us to work for an audience of One. No more attempting to please every single demand on our time and resources. Someone else’s description of what a good mom looks like, what a good dad looks like, what a good worker looks like, what a good student looks like. Our work may be witnessed by hundreds or even millions. But if we exist as we are designed, that work, whatever it is, is actually an act of worship presented for an audience of One.

This is how we were designed to live.

Sometimes, our emotional struggles can be a result of

physical elements (as discussed in Chapter 3) or emotional struggles (as seen in Chapter 4), but other times, the source of our sadness goes much deeper. We are spiritual beings, and our spiritual health is deeply connected to our mental well-being. Just as our bodies respond to physical stressors, our souls react to spiritual ones as well. When our spirit is neglected or troubled, it can manifest in our minds and bodies, just as physical illness might impact our emotions or thoughts.

Contemporary research has confirmed the deep connection between spiritual practices and mental health. In January 2012, the American Journal of Psychiatry published a groundbreaking longitudinal study from Columbia University, the first of its kind to examine the relationship between religiosity and the risk of major depression over an extended period. The study followed 114 adult offspring of depressed and non-depressed parents for ten years, all of whom identified as either Catholic or Protestant. Researchers measured their religiosity based on self-reported importance of spiritual beliefs and church attendance. The findings were compelling: those who reported a high importance of religion and spirituality had about one-fourth the risk of being diagnosed with major depressive disorder compared to those for whom spirituality held little significance.

Dr. Emily Deans, in her reflections on this study, noted that the results confirm what many people of faith have known for centuries: our spiritual lives are deeply intertwined with our mental health. Faith, it seems, is not just a matter of eternal importance; it has practical, real-world benefits for our emotional and psychological well-being.

Another study by Rush University Medical Center in Chicago found that “belief in a concerned God can improve response to medical treatment” in patients diagnosed with clinical depression. The researchers compared the levels of melancholy or hopelessness in 136 adults diagnosed with major depression or bipolar depression with their sense of “religious well-being.” They found participants who turned to a caring supreme being during their distress were 75 percent more likely to get better with medical treatment for clinical depression. The operative word here is “caring,” the researchers said. Study director Patricia Murphy summarized the findings, “The study found that those with strong beliefs in a personal and concerned God were more likely to experience improvement.” The distinction was “tied specifically to the belief that a Supreme Being cared.”

Things work best when used as they were designed. A car, for example, needs the right kind of fuel and regular maintenance; if you fill it with the wrong gas or skip oil changes, it quickly breaks down. A guitar: when it’s played with care and skill, it produces beautiful music, but if it’s misplayed—strummed carelessly or handled roughly—it only creates noise, and its strings wear out faster.

The story of Jonah tells us about a prophet who did not live as he was designed.

This story opens by telling us that the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai. In truth, that statement should stun us. That the Word of God, this eternal, omniscient, omnipotent being, would speak to anyone should shock us. God instructed Jonah to “Arise and go to Ninevah, that great city, and call out against it.”

When God told Jonah to “arise and go,” Jonah did indeed arise. He walked out of his front door, down into the valley of Megiddo to the Via Maris (the Way of the Sea). But instead of turning right and traveling five hundred miles northeast to Nineveh, he turned left and traveled a short distance down to the coastal area of modern-day Tel Aviv, to a little port called Joppa. There, he paid the fare and booked a voyage to a place called Tarshish. The narrative makes his intentions clear. He was not really heading anywhere. If he had found a boat sailing to Cleveland, Ohio, in the middle of February, that is the ticket he would have bought. He was only looking to get away from the presence of the Lord.

Boat fares would have been expensive. But Jonah did not care. It was worth every penny, or so he reasoned.

Throughout history, God’s people have been runners. Moses ran from God because he felt like he was not gifted enough. Elijah ran from God’s call because he felt like he was all alone and depressed. Jeremiah ran from God’s call because he felt like he was too young. Gideon ran from God’s call because he felt like he was too insignificant. Jonah had his own reason for running. And when we consider it, it seems rational.

This was no simple short-term mission trip. To understand what God was asking Jonah to do, we have to consider the geo-political situation in Israel at that time. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. And this empire was the world power of the day. They accomplished this through sheer brutality. The British Museum houses a gypsum wall panel relief depicting the Assyrian capture of the Israelite city of Lachish. It was commissioned by King

Sennacherib (705–681 BCE). In the relief, Assyrian soldiers attack the city with battering rams, scaling ladders, and volleys of arrows while defenders desperately attempt to repel them. The conquered residents face dire fates. Some are shown impaled on stakes, others are led away in chains, and still, more kneel, begging for mercy that will not come. The panel does not attempt to sanitize these atrocities; it accentuates them. The detail and quality illustrated in the piece are proof of the skill of the artist who created it. But the thirty-six feet of human carnage illustrated in the piece is proof of the brutality of the nation. Many nations conducted ruthless campaigns. But they rarely memorialized their violence in art. The Assyrians were ruthlessly violent people bent on conquest, and Israel was next.

Jonah knew something important about prophetic messages. Any time God pronounces judgment, he is obviously denouncing sin. But simultaneously, he is announcing an opportunity for grace and forgiveness. If the people heard the message and repented, God would doubtless forgive them. But if he did not go, and they did not hear, maybe God would destroy them. That sounded just fine to Jonah.

So he boarded the boat and went down into the hull. The ship sets sail, and I imagine that Jonah thought he was home free. But he was not. He ran right into the path of God's judgment. God hurled a great wind at the boat. So much so that the boat (literally in the Hebrew) "threatened to break up." I imagine the sound of the hull crackling under the pressure of the waves, but Jonah refuses to hear. And the sound of the mast creaking under the pressure of the wind, but this prophet refuses to listen. The whole ship is groaning under the weight of God's judgment, and still,

he will not relent. Fast asleep in the bow of the boat, Jonah is ignoring God's attempt to get his attention. But there was a group of sailors on the deck who were attentive to what was going on.

The sailors battled the storm with every ounce of strength they had. Panic set in as they hurled cargo overboard, desperate to lighten the load and keep the ship afloat. And when that didn't work, they resorted to prayer. Each man called out to his own god, everyone except the one who would be praying to the true and living God.

Soon, the sailors discovered Jonah asleep in the hold and demanded he call upon his God for deliverance. When their desperate prayers failed, they cast lots to determine who bore the storm's wrath, and the lot fell on Jonah. Jonah comes clean to the sailors. He was running from the presence of the Lord. Jonah's solution was for the sailors to throw him into the sea. His absence would calm the storm.

Notice what Jonah does not do. He does not speak to God. I have always wondered how this story would have played out if Jonah had confessed his sin and submitted to God's will. But the rebellious prophet was not ready for that yet.

Reluctantly, the sailors obeyed, and as Jonah sank beneath the waves, the storm ceased. In awe of this power, the sailors offered sacrifices and made vows to the Lord.

Jonah was swallowed up in the waves of the sea. He would have drowned, but God had appointed a large eastbound fish to swallow him.

Why did God do this? First, three hundred thousand souls needed this message. Their evil had come up before God,

and he had sent Jonah a message to pronounce judgment on the city. Three hundred thousand lost souls, but three hundred thousand loved souls. But there is another reason. There was another person God was trying to reach. And in the belly of that fish, he begins to pray.

At this point, Jonah's relationship with God is broken. And his despair is reflected in his words:

I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol, I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. . . The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. (Jonah 2:2-3, 5-6)

As we discussed earlier, we were made in, by, and for community. The most important expression of this need is in our community with our maker. God designed us to be in communion with Him, and our souls flourish when rooted in His presence. When we disconnect from God—whether through sin, neglect, or spiritual apathy—our inner life becomes disordered, leading to anxiety, depression, and a lack of peace. The only solution for this type of emotional distress is a restoration of the relationship. When we evaluate Scripture, we find three principles to help us accomplish this:

Turn to God: Turning from sin and finding fulfillment in Him.

Trust in God: Turning from self-reliance and finding hope in Him.

Talk with God: Engaging in honest, heartfelt prayer, just as Jesus did in His darkest moments.

In the following pages, we will explore each of these principles in detail,

### **Principle 1: Turn to God**

Throughout Scripture, we see examples of how spiritual harmony with God brings peace to the troubled heart. Consider the familiar twenty-third psalm. “He restores my soul; He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” A soul in alignment with the shepherd is a restored soul. But the opposite is also true. A break of this alignment leads to inner chaos, as illustrated in the life of King Saul. When Israel’s first king, whose struggles we briefly examined in Chapter 1, rebelled, God sent a spirit to torment him. He would find no peace separated from God.

Geographically, Jonah may have been headed to Tarshish, but spiritually, he was already isolated from God.

Sin breaks our relationship with God, creating a rift that isolates us from His presence. God makes this clear through Isaiah who declares, “Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you so that He will not hear” (Isaiah 59:2). Sin blocks our communication with God, leaving us spiritually distant and estranged. This separation from God is not only relational but also leads to spiritual death, “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Sin warps our hearts and



minds, turning us away from God and toward self-centered pursuits, corrupting our capacity for genuine worship and honest obedience. Romans 1:21 illustrates this effect, “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” Sin doesn’t merely disrupt our lives; it damages our very ability to perceive and respond to God’s love and truth. This condition leaves us spiritually bankrupt, in need of God’s grace and forgiveness to restore the relationship we were created to have with Him.

So, sin separates us from God. But why must this be so? We are all, from time to time, forced to tolerate people who do things we find in poor taste or just cringy. My wife and I have a routine around the holidays. When we leave a situation where I am forced to bite my tongue, which admittedly happens far too often, she will give me a look of silent encouragement. Later, at the appropriate moment, she simply says, “Thanks,” and I cordially respond, “You’re welcome.” Nothing else needs to be said. Her “thanks” is a recognition of my self-restraint to endure an uncomfortable situation. Is it possible, that I am more patient and gracious than God? Of course not. So why do our actions separate us from him?

To understand what is happening here, we must first understand the nature of sin. As we saw in Chapter 2, the first sin was an attempt to fulfill a desire to be “like God.” It was an endeavor<sup>110</sup> to make ourselves our god. In other words, it turns “self” into an idol. “Ok,” you might be thinking, “That was their experience. But that is not what I am doing. My sins are not idols to me.” Let’s test that assumption.

Today, as always, there is a wide array of gods, each with varying attributes and differing requirements for humanity. Some look at the wide array of gods as proof that there isn't one. Instead, it would be better to look at the number of gods as proof of the value of the real one, as things that have value are always counterfeited. If we boil these gods down to their most basic elements, they all share one thing in common. A "god" is a being we turn to for hope, who we look to for help, and who we turn to for our ultimate joy. This being will be adored and feared, worshiped, and sought as essential. When a god is fictional or finite, it is referred to as an idol. ("One has a god when a finite value is worshipped and adored and viewed as that without which one cannot receive life joyfully.")

So is there anything for you or me, other than God, where we find our hope, where we look first for help, where we turn for joy or fulfillment? Is there something other than him that we feel is essential? Idols hide stealthily in the human heart, so let's dig a little deeper. How do you feel when your political candidate is maligned or loses the election? How do you feel when finances get tight, or the job prospects seem bleak? How do you respond when someone offends you? These are not circumstances we should celebrate, but for many of us, the passion dedicated to these and other such struggles tells us there is something important at stake. And in moments of struggle and stress, where do we look to reestablish our joy? Do we turn to retail therapy, binge-watching, or scrolling through social media? Do we turn to substances, food, or distractions to numb the discomfort? These habits, while seemingly innocuous, can reveal what we truly rely on to cope with life's challenges, and consequently expose the idols that vie for control of

our hearts.

So, to view an idol as one sin among a long list of transgressions is inaccurate. Idolatry is not a subset of sin. Sin is idolatry. It elevates something or someone else to the place only God should occupy. It turns our appetites into an idol through addiction. It seeks to satisfy spiritual hunger with physical things, turning desires and cravings into masters that control us (Philippians 3:19). And it turns self into an idol through pride.

Jonah's heart was given to his nationalism and hatred for his enemy. This was his idol.

God has repeatedly announced his thoughts about idols. They are, to him, objects of jealousy (Ezekiel 8:3). Like any lover, God will not share the object of his affection with any other. Even our wedding ceremonies contain vows of commitment with no exceptions. No groom has ever written a vow that concludes "... and be faithful only to you except for the last Tuesday of the month when I'm going to go out with an old girlfriend." Such a husband-to-be will not be a husband for long. In the same way, God will not share you, or your heart, with another god. God is not envious of your heart. He is jealous of it (Exodus 20:5-6; 1 Kings 14:22).

But this raises an important question? Each of us has sinned and fallen short of God's glory. This means that if the above arguments are true, we have been unfaithful to God. For most of us, this transgression has been repeated many times. Will he forgive us?

According to Scripture, yes, he has.

Throughout Scripture, we are reminded of God's desire to

forgive sin. God takes no delight in the death of the wicked but desires that they will repent (Ezekiel 18:23). In 1 John 1:9, we are assured, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Psalm 103:12 declares the depth of this forgiveness: “As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us.” Isaiah 1:18 invites sinners to embrace this grace to find that “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” God’s forgiveness is grounded in Christ’s atonement, as seen in Ephesians 1:7: “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.” God desires to wipe away guilt and draw us into renewed fellowship with Him.

Jonah, having fled from God’s command, found himself in the belly of a great fish, a just consequence of his rebellion. Yet even from the depths, Jonah cried out to God, saying, “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple” (Jonah 2:7). In response, “the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land” (Jonah 2:10). I know that sounds very distasteful to us. But to Jonah, it was nothing short of deliverance. The fish, as it turned out, became both Jonah’s confinement and the vehicle of deliverance. Again, we see that judgment was the greatest form of God’s grace.

God forgives sinners. The hope of this fact is actually based on what we know about the very nature of God himself, specifically, the often ignored doctrine of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity teaches that God is one being who exists eternally in three distinct persons: the Father,

the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person of the Trinity is fully God, sharing the same divine essence, yet they relate to each other in unique roles within a perfect, loving community.

Grasping the nature of God is understandably illusive to the limited minds of humans. All knowledge ultimately finds its origin in experience, ours or someone else's. No one has seen God at any time and lived to tell the tale. So, God's nature will remain a mystery to us. But it is an important mystery because it reveals a God who is inherently relational.

To fully appreciate the value of this doctrine, try the following thought experiment with me. If you can imagine, with me, an eternal being. Let's call him God. To be eternal, there must have been a time when he existed by himself. So, imagine a time when there was only God. He exists utterly and totally alone. Now imagine, for the very first time, this God decides to create another being, from nothing. The moment he does this, he must also create, from nothing, the relationship he will have with that being. These ideas are difficult for us to grasp because we have never encountered such a situation. But imagine that a business manager decides to hire the company's first employee. To accomplish this, the entrepreneur must not only hire the person. But must he also not define the new relationship between the enterprise and this new person?

Now, when God (the entrepreneur) creates (hires) the first being outside himself, he faces the same situation. Let's say God calls this being "Creature." And let's say God defines this relationship as "love." The Creature once did not exist, but now he does. And in the same way, love once did

not exist, but now it does. This never-before-seen being now lives by this never-before-known relationship. In this scenario, this “love” is simply an action performed by God. Actions change depending on circumstances. It is, therefore, relegated to an act that necessarily extends from God’s creative nature. But it cannot be part of his nature itself. In other words, love would be a created thing, external to the unchanging nature of God. This makes God an impersonal god, and his connection to us is mechanical and conditional. This arrangement leaves worshippers in torturous apprehension. And it is the state of all who worship gods other than the one true, living, and Triune God.

God is an eternally triune being: Father, Son, and Spirit. He was not required to create the idea of love when he created the first being. God has eternally existed in loving community with himself. The Father loving the Son and the Spirit. The Spirit loving the Father and the Son. The Son loving the Father and the Spirit. So it is accurate to say love is not simply an act God performs, dependent on circumstance and the worthiness of the thing being loved. Love is based on God’s eternal nature. As John tells us, “God is love.” Love is as timeless and enduring as God himself.

Because of the doctrine of the Trinity, we can know that God’s love is based on his eternal nature and, therefore, not dependent on our faithfulness nor dismissed due to our unfaithfulness. God’s love will only change if his eternal nature changes. And that will never occur.

## **Principle 2: Trust in God**

Resting in God as the source of our joy means letting go

of our self-reliance and embracing the truth that we are not the masters of our fate. In the story of Jonah, we see a prophet who did not trust that God could redeem the Assyrians and protect his people.

The first sin entered the world when the first man and woman believed a lie—a lie that they could be like God, on par with Him, autonomous and independent (Genesis 3:5). According to Scripture, this lie is at the root of all human suffering. When my autonomy clashes with your autonomy, conflict ensues. When my self-confidence sees you have something I don't, greed erupts. When my self-reliance is limited by circumstances, anger rises in my heart. When my self-dependence is crushed by the need for help, pride springs to life.

So, if the problem is rooted in our desire for independence, what is the remedy? It seems clear that the solution must be the opposite. The solution to our attempt to be like God is to admit we are not. The remedy for our self-appointed independence is total dependence on God. This is the core of the Gospel message. God made salvation possible through Jesus Christ alone so that no one can boast.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

God will not share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8), which is why the book of Revelation depicts God's people throwing their crowns before the Lamb and crying, "You alone are worthy" (Revelation 4:10-11). Salvation is designed to draw us into a dependent relationship with Him, restoring the original design that was broken in Eden.

What does it mean for us to trust God? To trust in God means that we (1) acknowledge his power to act, (2) accept the truth that he loves us enough to be involved, and (3) admit our utter need for him.

**Acknowledge His Power to Act:** We must recognize that God is sovereign over all things and has the power to intervene in any situation.

**Accept His Love for Us:** Trust means believing that God is not distant or indifferent but deeply involved in our lives, working for our good.

**Admit Our Utter Need for Him:** To trust God is to admit our own limitations and helplessness, recognizing that we are dependent on His strength, wisdom, and provision.

As discussed above, according to the Christian message, humans were made by, in, and for the community of the Godhead. Christianity is unique in this regard. No other religion describes a deity of such intimate connection to his creation. Michael Gerson, a former presidential speechwriter, captures this while discussing his own struggles with seasons of darkness:

Like nearly one in ten Americans — and like many of you — I live with this insidious, chronic disease. Depression is a malfunction in the instrument we use to determine reality. The brain experiences a chemical imbalance and wraps a narrative around it. So, the lack of serotonin, in the mind's alchemy, becomes something like, 'Everybody hates me.' Over time, despair can grow inside you like a tumor.... there is this difference for a Christian believer: At the end of all our striving and longing, we find not a force but a face...



God's promise is somewhat different: That even when strength fails, there is perseverance. And even when perseverance fails, there is hope. And even when hope fails, there is love. And love never fails.

The God of Christianity has long been a source of hope in difficult times:

My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. (Psalm 62:1)

You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light. (Psalm 18:28)

My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. (Psalm 62:1)

When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches, For You have been my help, And in the shadow of Your wings, I sing for joy. (Psalm 63:6)

What happens when we relinquish matters outside our control to the Creator? You may recall from a previous unit that we discussed Elijah's dive into despair. His troubles began when he received the threat from Jezebel: "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow, I do not make your life like that of one of them" (1 Kings 19:2). At this word, the same prophet who had fearlessly confronted hundreds of false prophets fled in fear. Depressed and weary, he pleaded with God, "Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers" (1 Kings 19:4). What was happening in Elijah's heart at that moment? Elijah had done the math, and in his mind, he had come up short. He had given his all, and it wasn't enough to change the hearts of the people or to save his own life. Elijah's despair was rooted in his self-reliance—he was inventorying his re-

sources instead of God's. He focused on his own perceived failure rather than on God's ability to deliver. Peter offers an alternative approach to life:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. (1 Pe 5:6–7)

This mindset, which admittedly I am still working to develop, frees us from the crushing pressure to control everything around us. When we humbly take our place under the guiding hand of God, we no longer need to worry about things we cannot change. We recognize that He alone is in control. He stands ready to receive our anxieties. If a situation unfolds in a way that seems undesirable, we can rest in the confidence that He has a purpose. As we trust Him, we find that even the challenging circumstances are used for our good and His glory (Romans 8:28).

Had Elijah paused to inventory God's resources—His power, His sovereignty, His faithfulness—his perspective would have been different. He would have remembered that the God who sent fire from heaven could also protect him from a human queen. But instead, Elijah's reliance on himself led him to a sense of hopelessness.

Trusting in God means more than believing that He exists. It means leaning into His strength when we are weak, relying on His wisdom when we are confused, and depending on His love when we feel unlovable. It means turning to the one who said:

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. "Take My yoke upon you and learn

from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:28–29)

### **Principle 3: Talk With God**

One of the common themes so far in this chapter has been a need to understand the connection between relationships and communication. The type of relationship two people have will direct the tone and content of every discussion. This is also true of our communication with God. And like all relationships, the one we share with God requires communication. In the same way that silence can drive a wedge between friends, a lack of communication with God can create distance in our spiritual lives. And distance in a relationship will always create emotional stress. Husbands and wives will experience stress when there is a disconnect within the marriage. Co-workers will feel tension when communication breaks down in the workplace. Even friends, despite shared history, can drift apart when they stop sharing their thoughts and lives with one another. The principle is simple: relationships thrive on communication.

Our relationship with God operates on the same principle. Prayer, worship, and time spent in His Word are not mere religious rituals. They are vital conversations. When these practices are neglected the consequences ripple into our emotional well-being. But when we talk with God, our hearts are drawn closer to Him, and we experience His presence in a tangible way.

God, the sovereign of the cosmos, wants to speak to us. That thought should excite us much more than it does. Just think about the most famous person you have ever met.

How did you act around them? I once met Kyle Chandler, the actor who played Eric Taylor on Friday Night Lights. I was part of a group of evangelists doing an outreach at Texas Motor Speedway. There was definitely some work to be done there. He and I ate brats together. I fumbled over my words the entire time. In fairness, I got started on the wrong foot when someone asked me if I recognized who he was. I did not.

How much more should we be star struck that God has spoke to us through his Spirit and Word; and that he invites us to speak back through our words of prayer and praises.

### *God Speaks to Us*

If you had to boil the Bible down to one phrase, what would it be? Mark Russel has a suggestion. In “God Is Disappointed in You,” Russell paraphrases Scripture, condensing each of the Bible’s 66 books down to just a few pages. While his work, on occasion, captures the sense of a text, often it is a highly sarcastic, irreverent, and at times outright vulgar retelling of Scripture. According to one review, the work is for “people who would like to read the Bible, if it would just cut to the chase.”

Russel, who had grown up reading the Scripture, spent three years “reading the Bible from front to back twice, constant editing, and revision, and hustling PhD candidates for free advice.” “This would become a quest, to not make this just a collection of Bible stories,” he explains, “but to really understand the book on a meaningful level, to give some insight on this ubiquitous but somehow unknown holy book.” Listen to the concluding lines of his work:

Once we agreed to publish the book with Top Shelf, the first question to come up was, “What do we call it?” After a few aborted suggestions, all of which I’m glad we turned down, we all started to focus on “God Is Disappointed in You” (which is the perfect title for this book). Because if I had to condense the Bible down to a single phrase, that would be it. . . I don’t claim this book is a benefactor of divine intervention, though there were moments when it sure felt like it. Or maybe divine intervention is simply what we call our hard work, hand-ringing, and the hope that we somehow got it right.

But let me assure you, “God is disappointed in you” is in no way the central theme of the Bible. Divine inspiration is not our hard work, hand-ringing, and the hope that we somehow got it right. It is the story of the hard work, hand-piercing, and belief that Jesus got it right. When he summarized his father’s word, he did not use the language of rules but of relationship. More than teaching us how to live, according to Jesus, Scripture teaches us how to love.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah, not just once, but three times. And when it did, Jonah had the opportunity to speak back. Consider that for a moment. God is not simply broadcasting. He is listening.

### *God Hears From Us*

When Jonah does speak, we are left to wonder if he is speaking words of prayer or words of praise. This is because prayer and praise are two sides of the same coin. Often, our deepest prayers become songs of praise, and our praise turns into prayer. Listen to David’s words, “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Psalm 43:5). Was this prayer or praise? Both? Whatever we choose to call it, when we are overwhelmed, we are invited to lift our eyes above our circumstances and focus on God’s character.

Let’s assume you were invited to visit a member of the royal family. What kind of questions would you ask to prepare for your visit? You would likely want to know how to approach the individual. What kind of topics can be discussed? And how will the conversation proceed? Jesus helped us with these natural questions. In what has become known as the Sermon on the Mount, after warning his followers about habits to avoid when approaching heaven’s sovereign ruler, he explains what our conversation should look like. What we know as the Lord’s Prayer is Jesus’s attempt to invite us into the presence of heaven’s chief officer. This is his attempt to prepare us for a conversation with the king. Almost every major figure in church history has written on this passage. Many dedicate whole volumes to its teachings. Many times, each phrase will become an entire chapter. While the depth of this passage allows for such devotion, there is a danger in looking so deeply. Namely, we can miss the larger point Jesus is making.

The prayer can be divided into seven parts: An opening statement, three statements directed to God’s glory, and three statements dedicated to our needs. Let’s briefly look at each element before summarizing the principles being illustrated.

**Our Father:** While Israel knew God corporately as Father, individually, he was unapproachable. The idea of calling God “father” at a personal level was a radical concept. This

change reflects the relationship God wishes to have with his creation and the care he offers.

**Your name:** Name was not just an identifying mark of someone's person. It identified their nature and power. Hallowed means separate, different. Nature, character. The greatest power is the power to save sinners. "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

**Your kingdom:** The Christian message has implications for whole communities, but it is not to be equated with an earthly government. Jesus said his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). But one day, his kingdom will be all there is. In other words, he is not elevating governments to his kingdom. He is bringing his kingdom to this world. The message of John the Baptist, Jesus, and his apostles was a call to repent, for the kingdom of god is at hand.

**Your will:** Everything works better when it is used for its natural purposes. Creation is naturally drawn to glorify God. God's will is his desire to give the great good for his creation by accomplishing the greatest glory for himself. Jesus said his whole existence was to do the Father's will (John 6:38). Just before the crucifixion he was praying, "not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

**Give us:** In Mark 8:14-21, the disciples are worried because they have forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. Jesus warns them about the "leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." The disciples misunderstood and thought He was referring to their lack of bread. Jesus, aware of

their discussion, questions their understanding and faith, reminding them of the two occasions He fed the multitudes with only a few loaves of bread.

*Forgive us:* We cannot overcome our bad works with good works. Neither can we wash away our good works. Which means our only way to escape judgment is forgiveness. Jesus taught that debtors should attempt to reach terms with the holder of the debt quickly (Luke 12:57–59).

*Deliver us:* Our personal holiness is not a product of our individual discipline or ability. “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind,” Paul tells a church immersed in worldly temptations, “And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). By contrast, sin comes when we choose to follow those temptations rather than relying on God (James 1:12-14).

When we look at Jesus’s model prayer as a single unit of thought, three principles emerge. First, our prayers should seek God’s glory over our needs. The prayer begins by first focussing on what God deserves before seeking what we desire. In another section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matthew 6:33–34). If we seek one, we get both. If we seek the other, we get neither. Viewed this way, the choice seems obvious. Second, our prayers seek regular dependence on God’s provision. We need not attempt to stockpile blessings for our future needs. He does not allow us to store up resources for the future. When God blessed Israel with



man from heaven, he rationed it on a daily basis. This was not due to a supply chain issue. It was due to a heart issue. And, third, our prayers seek what God already wants to do. Do you think God is in heaven thinking, “Well, I was planning on my name being hallowed today. But Jim is praying for it. So I’ll go ahead and grant his request.” Kingdom? Will? What about our deliverance from evil? Forgiveness from sin. Daily bread? These are all things God wants. Why pray then? Because prayer brings us into alignment with God’s sovereign will and our total dependence.

I must admit, most of my prayers give more priority to my needs. Oh, sure, I will spend some time acknowledging God and his glory. But I quickly move to consulting him about the things I cannot control. I have heard many prayers throughout my ministry, so I know I am not alone in this. Recent college graduates who consult God on the job market, which they cannot control. A child who consults God about the health of his parents, which he cannot control. A mother who consults God about her adult children, who she cannot control. It is important to consult God, this is why Paul tells us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The problem occurs when this becomes the priority of our conversations with God.

Prayer that prioritizes our needs over God’s glory is simply another way we attempt to take control of our circumstances, only by controlling God. If we are trying to consult him in an effort to find a way to take control, we are missing the point. Prayer is not about getting our way, it is about discovering God’s.

Paul prayed three times for God to remove his thorn. But God stayed in control. He never answered that prayer in

Paul's prayer in his earthly lifetime. But through the process of prayer, Paul discovered a deeper appreciation of God's grace. That, he discovered, was worth more than the relief he was seeking:

Three times, I pleaded with the Lord about this, saying that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (2 Corinthians 12:8-9)

## Conclusion

I know that three is a nice biblical number, but I can tell you, I didn't stop at three. The desire to be healed of my vision impairment had become something of an obsession. It consumed my conversations with God. Any time someone had a new idea for how to get prayers answered, I tried it out. I have fasted, performed incantations, and even drawn a picture of eyes on a piece of paper above a cross. That was one I heard from a classmate in third grade. That's right, I once got my theology from an eight-year-old. I did all of this because someone had convinced me that the sovereign will of God would fit into a human paradigm. It had become, in every definition of the word, an idol.

Some years ago, God began the slow process of removing my insatiable desire for healing. I crossed a major threshold one day while out for an evening walk. As was my pattern, I was reasoning with God for healing. But this conversation was different from all the previous ones. In a very real way, it was like God had joined me that evening. I

sensed that God asked me, “Why do you want me to heal you?” In a rush of thought, the answers were numerous and reasonable. If I could see like everyone else, I could drive. If I could see like everyone else, I could avoid awkward and embarrassing moments like introducing myself to the same visitor three times in a row. If I could see like everyone else, then reading would be so much easier. But he responded clearly, “Haven’t I already made provision for all these things? Haven’t you seen me compensate and work in each of these situations? Isn’t my grace sufficient?”

Then there was this involuntary reflex, as though God’s word had hit a trigger point in my heart. I spoke words I would have never spoken aloud. “But if I were healed,” I said, “I wouldn’t have to rely on you so much.” I accidentally told the truth.

There it is. Crippling, cathartic truth. All the time my lips were muttering “Heal me! Heal me!” My heart was demanding, “Free me! Free me!” Free me from the humbling experience of radical dependence. Free me from the frustrating redundancy of trusting you to do what I can’t on my own. Free me from the burden of relying on you in my weaknesses. God, free me from you!

No wonder God never answered my prayer. Since that time, I have found the idea of healing a mentally nauseating proposition. There is nothing blindness has taken from me that God has not replaced with his grace. And the experience of his grace is worth so much more than 20/20 vision.

We are sometimes tempted to think that our path to emotional health can only be traveled as “free” people. But

the fruitless pursuit of freedom itself will only add to our depression and anxiety. The only way to get free from one master is to subject yourself to another. We were not made to be free; we were made to be dependent.

Before Disney went crazy cashing in on the Star Wars franchise with almost weekly installments, there was the backstory of Hans Solo. Solo was the prequel film that tells the origin story of the galaxy's favorite freedom-fighting loner. Han and Qi'ra (his childhood love interest) were raised in an Oliver Twist-style indentured servitude under the thumb of Lady Proxima. The pair are about to escape when Qi'ra is detained. Consumed with a plan to free himself from the officers looking for him and rescue Qi'ra, Han inadvertently approached an Empire recruiter:

Recruiting Officer: What's your name?

Han Solo: Han  
Recruiting Officer: [looking for Han's last name] And who are your people?

Han Solo: I don't have people. I'm alone.

Recruiting Officer: Hans. . . Solo. . . Approved!

And with that, Han is now an unwitting servant of the Empire.

As the film unfolds, we quickly realize everyone is a slave to someone else. And everyone is trying to get free. Some years later, Han finds himself fighting against the Wookies, who have been enslaved by the Empire, one of those oppressed is named Chewie. Later, a smuggler named Tobias Beckett invites Han and Chewie into his life of crime but warns, "Once you're in, you're in for good." Beckett himself is not a free man. He serves the head of a crime syndicate

named Dryden Vos. And while meeting with Vos for the first time, Solo is stunned to see Qi'ra. She also managed to free herself from Lady Proxima. But she is still not free. She now serves at the pleasure of Vos. And Even Vos, we learn later, serves a former Sith Lord.

As she explains how she was able to “free herself” from Lady Proxima, Qi'ra offers this bit of perpetual truth; “Everyone serves someone.”

Freedom and liberation are core components of Solo's storyline. Whether it is L3-37 attempting to liberate enslaved droids, Chewie fighting to liberate enslaved Wookies, or Solo trying to liberate himself and the woman he loves, everyone is trying to get free. But no matter how hard they try, everyone still serves someone. The only freedom they have is to decide who they will serve.

Everyone thinks they want to be free. But everyone serves someone. We have only the freedom to choose who. Adam and Eve, living in freedom from so much of what oppresses us today, had to decide whether they would be servants to their own passions, or would they subject themselves to the will of their Creator (Genesis 2:16-17). Israel, liberated from Egypt, had to decide which deity they would serve (Joshua 24:14-15). And Jesus's disciples were called to decide whether they would serve God or wealth (Matthew 6:24).

You and I were not made to be like God; we were made to be dependent on him. We were never meant to be our own overlords. No one is autonomous; no one is totally free, and no one is “solo.” Everyone serves someone. Who will you serve?

We have all been there. We were running, and it didn't mat-

ter where we were headed. The truth is, we were not really heading anywhere, nowhere we could define. We are actually fleeing something. My feet have calluses from journeys that I have made running away from God. His grace has always outpaced me (Psalm 23:6).

Want to run from God? The Antipodes Map is a fun little website you can use to plan your “getaway.” It allows you to enter any location on the planet, it will return the point on the globe that is the farthest away. From where I am right now, the exact opposite side of the Earth for me is somewhere in the middle of the Indian Ocean, halfway between the French Southern Arctic Islands and the west coast of Australia. Take a break right now and see where the farthest point is for you. It could be helpful in the case of a bad break-up or a boss with boundary issues. But it will not work with God.

For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the Earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land (Psalm 95:3-5).

Think about all that is said in this passage. Where could we run where God is not? The Dead Sea is the lowest valley on Earth, with a maximum depth of 1,004 feet. God is there. Want deeper still? Try the Mariana Trench, the deepest part of the ocean, with a depth of 36,037 feet. But God is there too. Mount Everest rises over 29,000 feet above sea level with an average temperature of -19°C (-2°F). God is there as well. Thinking you will try going extraterrestrial and traveling the 248,000 miles to the moon? Well...

He covers the face of the full moon and spreads over it

his cloud. (Job 26:)

There is no place where you can run where God is not, God is everywhere. Now I know geographically, we get this. But does this stop us? No! But still, we run. Since when has sin and rebellion made sense?

God wants you and I to stop running and to, instead, rest in his will for our lives.

# Endnotes

## Chapter 1

- 1 Dorothy Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 2.
- 2 Susan David, “The Gift and Power of Emotional Courage,” TEDWomen 2017, November 2017, accessed September 27, 2024, [https://www.ted.com/talks/susan\\_david\\_the\\_gift\\_and\\_power\\_of\\_emotional\\_courage?subtitle=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_david_the_gift_and_power_of_emotional_courage?subtitle=en).
- 3 Polycarp, *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), 41.

## Chapter 2

- 4 Quoted in Elisabeth Elliot, *Secure in the Everlasting Arms*, Revell, 2002, p. 91.
- 5 Haleluya Hadero, “Artificial Intelligence, Real Emotion. People Are Seeking a Romantic Connection with the Perfect Bot,” Associated Press, February 14, 2024, <https://www.pressherald.com/2024/02/14/artificial-intelligence-real-emotion-people-are-seeking-a-romantic-con>