

A REASON FOR YOUR SEASON

50 DAYS THROUGH THE 9 SEASONS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1 REFINEMENT:
DEPENDENCE



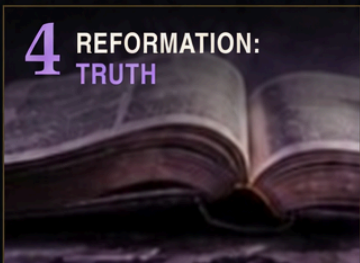
2 REPENTANCE:
MERCY



3 REVIVAL:
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4 REFORMATION:
TRUTH



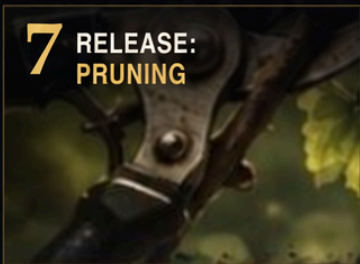
5 RECALCULATE:
HUMILITY



6 REVOLUTION:
ETERNITY



7 RELEASE:
PRUNING



8 REWARD:
STEWARDSHIP



9 REPEAT:
SERVANTHOOD



CHRONICLES OF A REFORMER

The Boy Who Pushes the Plow



A Reason for Your Season

*A 50-Day Journey Through the Nine Seasons of
the Kingdom of God*

A Reason for Your Season

Draft manuscript. Not for distribution.

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Week 1 • Getting Started

Before You Begin • A Book for the Plowman

William Tyndale once told a church official, "If God spares my life, I will cause a boy who drives the plow to know more of the Scriptures than you do." He paid for that vision with his life. These pages exist to carry it forward.

This is not a self-help guide. It is a meditative workout, a battle plan and a book of wisdom. It's written for the plowman, the student, the parent and the worker, so that anyone can learn to discern their season and walk in it.

It is built on five commitments:

- **Faceless.** The message, not the messenger. "He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less" (John 3:30). You'll find my stories in these pages, but not my name. That's on purpose.
- **Concise.** Wisdom in the style of Proverbs: short enough to remember, deep enough to carry all day.
- **Visual.** Stories and images as modern parables, because what the eye receives, the heart often keeps.
- **Together.** Meant to be read, discussed and lived in community. "Those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the LORD listened" (Malachi 3:16).
- **Alive.** Not a checklist, but a sword that cuts to the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

In an age of deceptive narratives and endless distraction, this is a call to a generation to rise faceless and nameless: hungry for God's Word, pushing the plow and living for eternity.

"Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life." (Proverbs 4:23, NLT)

How to Read This Book

This book is a 50-day journey. The first five days lay the foundation. The next 45 walk through the nine seasons of the Kingdom of God, five days for each.

Each season opens with a story from my own life. Some of them I'm proud of. Some of them I'm not. All of them are true. After the story come four days of teaching on what God is doing in that season and how to cooperate with Him in it.

Read one chapter a day. Don't rush ahead. Twenty minutes is enough. The goal is not to finish a book; it's to let God finish something in you.

Stop at the end of each day. Every chapter closes with four things to carry with you:

- **Point to ponder:** one truth to think about through the day.
- **Verse to remember:** one Scripture to hide in your heart.
- **Question to consider:** one honest question to answer before God.
- **Season check:** one question that helps you see where you are right now.

Read it with others. Seasons are hard to see alone. At the end of each week you'll find a guide for a small group, a class or even two friends at a kitchen table. Do the journey with someone who has permission to tell you the truth.

Expect to see yourself. You may recognize your current season on Day 5, or not until Day 30. You may find you've been in one season for years without knowing its name.

That's all right. Naming it is the beginning of walking through it.

Still Behind the Plow

Let me be honest with you from the start. I'm not writing as someone who has arrived. I don't have all the answers, and I'm not going to pretend I do. I'm still in the field with my hands on the plow. God is still refining me, still renewing my mind, and still teaching me to recognize what He's doing in the seasons of my own life.

I'm not writing from the finish line. I'm writing from the trenches.

What I can do is share what God has shown me. These are the revelations and biblical truths that helped me break cycles I thought I'd never get out of, confront lies I believed for years, and walk in more freedom in Christ than I knew was possible. I'm passing them on because somebody needs them, the same way I did.

But my understanding is still growing. I answer to the same Scriptures I'm asking you to search. The Word holds me accountable just like it holds you.

And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul was teaching the truth.

Acts 17:11

So here's my invitation: be a Berean. Receive with an open heart, then open your Bible and check my work. Test what you read. If the apostle Paul could be tested, so can a plowboy.

You don't have to agree with every conclusion I draw. Eat the chicken, throw away the bone. Wrestle with the questions. Pray through the hard passages. Let God's Word challenge both of us.

Iron sharpens iron, and the Word sharpens us both.

My heart is simple. I want to help you recognize biblical patterns, examine what you actually believe, and grow in your own walk with Christ. That was Tyndale's dream for the boy pushing the plow: a man who knows the Scriptures for himself instead of leaning on someone else to read them for him.

If these pages send you deeper into the Word and closer to Jesus, they've done their job.

Don't take my word for it. Take His.

What's with All the Movies?

Learning to Recognize the Pattern

Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.

Hebrews 5:14

If you've read more than a few pages of these books, you've noticed. I quote Scripture, I tell stories from my own life, and then out of nowhere I'm talking about a movie. Some of you love it. Some of you are wondering why a book about the Kingdom of God spends so much time at the theater.

Fair question. Let me answer it.

My stories matter, and I'll keep telling them. But I never wanted these books to be about the boy pushing the plow. I want them to be about the field. The message has to stay bigger than the messenger. My prayer is that you start seeing biblical truth in the world you walk through every single day, long after you've closed the book.

That takes practice. Movies give us a place to practice.

Think about what we watch. A man is betrayed by the people closest to him. A woman wanders through a wilderness she didn't choose. Somebody gets a promotion nobody saw coming. Somebody else finally catches the success they chased for years, only to find it exposed something they never dealt with. With Scripture underneath us, we start to see the patterns: refinement, repentance, temptation, surrender, restoration. Joseph is in those stories. So is Saul. So is the prodigal.

**What you learn to recognize in a story can help
prepare you to recognize it in a season.**

Knowing the Words, Missing the Season

Here's what burdens me. Many of God's people know there are seasons in walking with Him. We've heard the sermons. We know the vocabulary. But ask us which season we're in right now, and we go quiet. We can define the wilderness and still not know we're standing in one. We can explain refinement and still miss how God may be forming us in the middle of an attack—even when we cannot tell what is happening behind the scenes.

The men of Issachar understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take (1 Chronicles 12:32). That's the goal. Knowing seasons exist is a start. Discerning what faithfulness looks like in the one in front of you is the assignment.

Anybody who has played football at a high level knows the film room. The point of watching tape is simple: when that formation shows up on game day, you've already seen it. You don't have to figure it out in the moment. You recognize it.

Film study for the soul is learning to recognize the play before it runs.

Pausing the Scene

This practice has been one of the biggest tools for growth in my own walk with Christ. I've learned to hit pause on a scene, a conflict, or the way a character responds, and ask three questions:

What biblical pattern does this remind me of?

Where have I seen this in Scripture?

Where am I responding the same way?

That last one is the one that gets me every time.

Christ, the Rosetta Stone

For centuries nobody could read Egyptian hieroglyphs. Then the Rosetta Stone turned up with the same message carved in languages people could already read, and the whole thing opened up.

That's how I see Christ. His life, His teaching, His cross and His resurrection are the key that lets me read what I'm looking at. Without Him, a story is just a story. With Him, I start to recognize the shape of the Kingdom everywhere. And Scripture is the foundation I test every connection against, so I can discern what God may be teaching me in a particular season.

Jesus taught this way Himself. He didn't hand the crowds a lecture. He talked about seed and soil, lost sheep and lost coins, two sons and a wedding feast. The ordinary world became His classroom.

Jesus always used stories and illustrations like these when speaking to the crowds. In fact, he never spoke to them without using such parables.

Matthew 13:34

Eat the Chicken, Throw Away the Bone

Let me be clear. A movie does not carry the authority of Scripture. Not even close. And not every detail on the screen needs a spiritual meaning. Hollywood isn't preaching, and I'm not asking you to baptize everything you watch.

An illustration is only as valuable as how faithfully it helps us recognize and apply what God has already revealed. When a scene lines up with the Word, hold on to it. When it doesn't, let it go. Eat the chicken, throw away the bone. Paul put it this way: test everything that is said, and hold on to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

The Word judges the movie. The movie never judges the Word.

A “Discernment Famine”

*You know how to interpret the weather signs in the sky, but you
don't know how to interpret the signs of the times.*

Matthew 16:3

I was sitting with my friend Peter Vescovi, and our conversation turned to the condition of the body of Christ. We talked about the spiritual abuse so many believers have suffered at the hands of leaders, and how seldom those leaders are ever held to account. Pulpits are full and Bibles are open, yet wolves move freely among the sheep and few seem able to recognize them. Then Peter gave a name to what we were both seeing: a discernment famine.

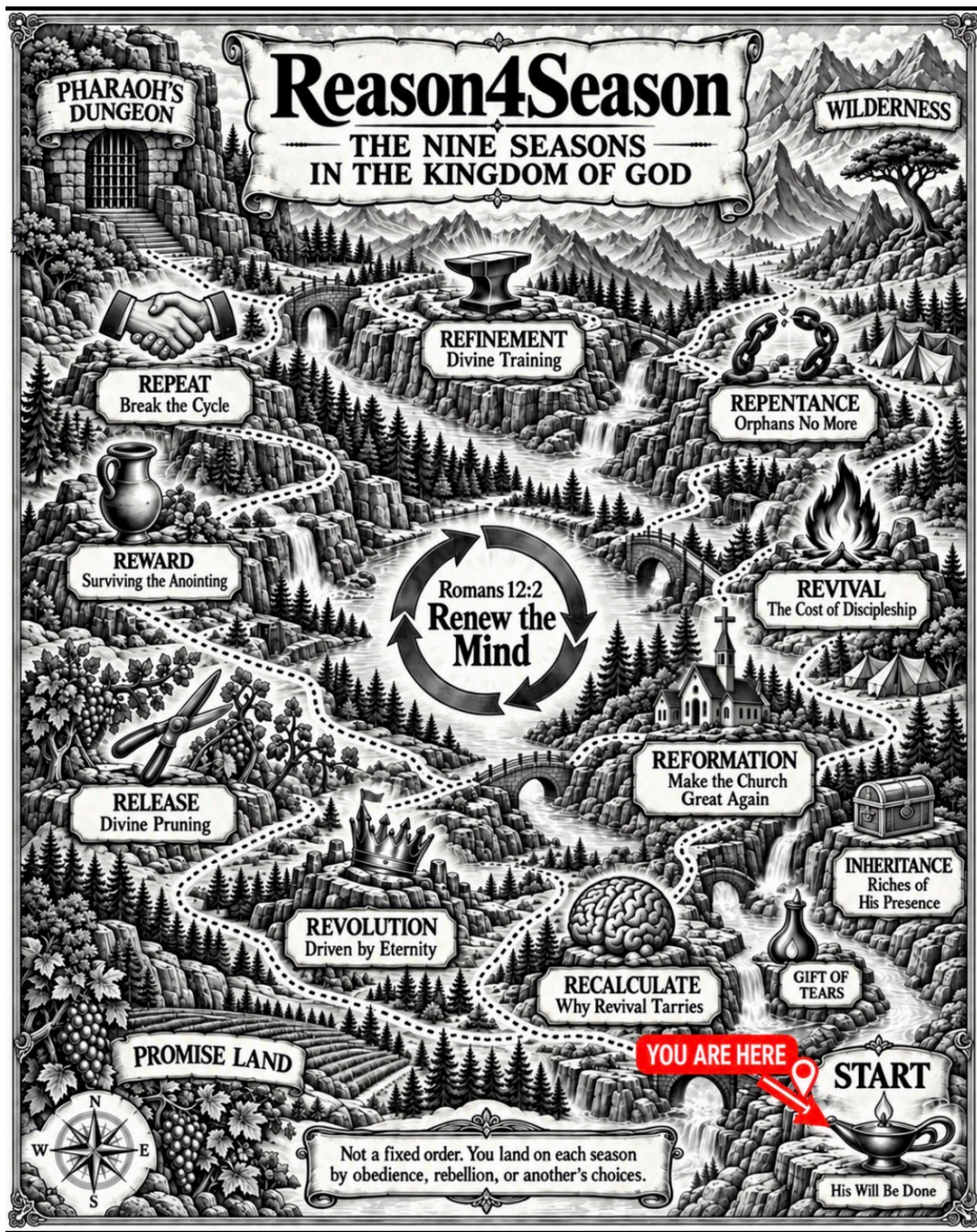
The phrase stuck with me, because it describes exactly where we are. A Discernment Famine is a season when God's people have plenty of verses and history but little Spirit-given understanding of what God is doing now. They can quote the Scriptures yet can't recognize the Author when He stands in front of them. It is the absence of the anointing that rested on the sons of Issachar, men who "had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" (1 Chronicles 12:32). That kind of discernment cannot be learned from a commentary. It comes only through the Person and work of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14; John 16:13).

This is how abuse hides in plain sight. A congregation without discernment judges a leader by his gifting, his knowledge, and his platform rather than by his fruit (Matthew 7:16). It defends the man instead of protecting the flock.

It is also why the Pharisees knew the written Word and still crucified the Living Word. They searched the Scriptures thinking life was in the text itself, but they refused to come to the One the text pointed to (John 5:39–40). They had the letter without the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:6). Their famine was not of bread but of hearing the word of the LORD (Amos 8:11).

A Discernment Famine is knowing about God without discerning God, which means having the written Word without the Spirit who reveals the Living Word.

A map to help you recognize the terrain. These seasons can overlap and return. Wherever you find yourself, the invitation is to walk faithfully with Christ.



Day 1 • Because You Prayed for It

*"I have refined you, but not as silver is refined.
Rather, I have refined you in the furnace of
suffering." (Isaiah 48:10)*

I was watching an X-Men movie when a scene caught my attention. An older Charles Xavier was speaking to his younger self across time.

How incredible would that be? I thought. Imagine being able to speak to your twenty-year-old self with the wisdom of a seventy-six-year-old.

Then I sensed the Lord interrupt my thoughts:

"You have something better than that. You have My written Word."

As I reflected on those words, I sensed Him take the illustration further.

"If you could go back, your younger self would ask, 'Why are things so hard?' And your older self would answer, 'Because you prayed for it.'"

That stopped me.

What I had asked for

I had prayed for wisdom. I had prayed for maturity, deeper faith and a life that reflected Christ. But had I recognized the training when it arrived?

I wanted the fruit, yet I often questioned the process that would grow it. I wanted to be strong, but I resented the weight room. I asked God to make me more like Jesus and then complained when life started to look like the road Jesus walked.

"My suffering was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees" (Psalm 119:71).

Reverse engineered

The Lord began opening my eyes to a larger perspective. God is not confined to time. He sees the end from the beginning. It was as though He had reverse engineered my life. He knew the person He was forming, and He knew how even the difficult chapters could serve His purpose.

That brought new meaning to Romans 8:28: God works all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. And Psalm 37:23 declares, "The LORD directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives."

This did not mean every hardship was something I had requested, or that every painful thing was good. It meant that even suffering could become a place of instruction, formation and redemption.

There was a reason for my season.

Come up here

The invitation John heard, "Come up here" (Revelation 4:1), became a picture of my own need for heaven's perspective. Ephesians 2:6 says God has seated us with Christ in heavenly places. I did not have to interpret my entire life from the ground level of my circumstances.

I might not understand every detail. But I could trust the One who sees the whole picture.

My younger self might still ask, "Why is this so hard?"

But now a deeper faith could answer: "Remember what you prayed for. God is forming something in you that you cannot yet fully see."

Your turn

Maybe you picked up this book because something is hard right now. A marriage, a job, a diagnosis, a prayer that seems to hit the ceiling. Before you ask God why, try asking Him something else: *What have I been praying for?*

You may find that the season you're in isn't the opposite of your prayers. It may be the answer to them, arriving in a form you didn't expect.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** The season I'm in may be the answer to my prayers, arriving in a form I didn't expect.
- **Verse to remember:** "My suffering was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees." Psalm 119:71
- **Question to consider:** What have I asked God to make me, and how might my current season be part of His answer?
- **Season check:** If my older self could speak to me today, what would he or she say about this season?

Day 2 • Interpret Your Season, or You'll Only Survive It

"From the tribe of Issachar, there were 200 leaders of the tribe with their relatives. All these men understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take." (1 Chronicles 12:32)

Here is the sentence this whole book is built on:

If you don't know how to interpret your season, you will try to survive that season instead of being tutored and trained by God in it.

Think about the difference between those two words.

Survival asks, *How do I get out of this?* Training asks, *What is God building in me through this?*

Survival counts the days. Training counts the lessons. Survival grits its teeth until the season is over, and then often has to repeat it, because nothing was learned. Training lets the season do its work, and walks out different.

Are we there yet?

Picture two boys in the back seat on a long road trip.

The first one has no idea where he's going. Every ten minutes he asks, "Are we there yet?" Every bump feels like a mistake. Every detour feels like the trip is ruined. He spends the whole ride frustrated, because he can't interpret anything he sees out the window.

The second boy has looked at the map. He knows the mountains come before the coast. When the road gets steep, he isn't surprised. When they stop for gas, he doesn't panic. He's on the same trip, in the same car, but he's living a

completely different experience, because he can interpret the road.

Most believers ride through life like the first boy. We love God. We're in the car. But we have no map for the seasons, so every hard stretch feels like something has gone wrong.

The sons of Issachar

When David was gathering an army to become king, the Bible lists thousands of soldiers from every tribe. Most are described by their weapons and numbers. But one group is described differently. The men of Issachar "understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take."

Notice the two halves of that sentence. They understood the *times*, and they knew *the best course to take*. Discernment wasn't just insight; it led to the right action. Knowing your season matters because it tells you how to respond to it.

Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of His day for missing this: "You know how to interpret the weather signs in the sky, but you don't know how to interpret the signs of the times!" (Matthew 16:3). They could read the weather. They couldn't read what God was doing right in front of them.

"For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Every season has a purpose. When you know the season, you can start cooperating with its purpose instead of fighting it.

Oil you can't borrow

Jesus told a story about ten young women waiting for a bridegroom (Matthew 25:1–13). All ten had lamps. All ten fell asleep. The difference showed up at midnight, when the bridegroom finally came. Five had extra oil. Five didn't.

The five without oil asked to borrow some. The answer was no. Not because the others were selfish, but because some things can't be borrowed. You can't borrow someone else's intimacy with God. You can't borrow the character that was formed in someone else's hard season.

Oil is gathered in the seasons. Every season you learn from instead of merely surviving adds oil to your lamp. That's why this book exists: so that when midnight comes, your lamp is still burning.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** If I don't interpret my season, I'll only survive it instead of being trained by God in it.
- **Verse to remember:** "All these men understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take." 1 Chronicles 12:32
- **Question to consider:** Am I asking "How do I get out of this?" or "What is God building in me through this?"
- **Season check:** Is there a hard season I survived but never learned from, and has it started to come back around?

Day 3 • Seasons Are Not Errors

"Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you." (1 Peter 4:12)

Nobody is offended by winter.

We don't wake up on the first cold morning and decide the planet is broken. We don't take it personally when the leaves fall. We know winter is a season, so we pull out a coat and keep living.

But when a hard season comes in our spiritual lives, many of us react as if something has gone terribly wrong. We assume we've missed God, or God has missed us. Why?

Your brain is looking for errors

Dr. Henry Cloud explains it this way:

"If your brain senses that something is the way it is supposed to be, it begins gathering resources to initiate action. But if it senses that something is wrong, which registers as an 'error,' it moves against or flees whatever it sees as wrong. That is why it is so important for you to have a worldview that sees seasons and life cycles as normal, so your brain will not register them as errors and fight them."

Read that again slowly. When your mind labels a season as an error, it does one of two things: it fights or it flees. You resist what God is doing, or you run from it.

But when your mind recognizes a season as normal, as something expected and purposeful, it starts gathering resources to move forward. Same circumstances. Completely different response.

When I didn't know

After I broke my leg in high school, there were three months before my next doctor's appointment. Those months were confusing. I wasn't healing as fast as I thought I should. Every week that the leg didn't feel right registered in my mind as a sign that something was wrong, with my body, with my future, maybe even with God.

Looking back, I can see that God was doing some of His deepest work in me during those very months. But at the time I had no category for it. I didn't know I was in a season of refinement. I just knew it hurt and it wasn't going the way I'd planned.

That's what happens when you don't have a map. Training feels like failure.

Do not be surprised

Peter wrote to believers who were suffering, and his first instruction wasn't "Get out of it." It was "Don't be surprised by it." Don't treat the fiery trials "as if something strange were happening to you."

James said the same thing from the other direction: "Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing" (James 1:2-4).

You can only see a trial as an opportunity for joy if you know what it's producing.

Not a fixed order

One more thing will help you as you read. The nine seasons in this book are not a staircase you climb once. They are not a fixed order.

You can land in a season through obedience, through rebellion, or through someone else's choices. You can be in more than one at the same time. You can return to one you thought you'd finished.

That isn't a sign that you've failed. It's a sign that you're alive, and that God is still at work. Seasons are not errors. They're the way He grows His people.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Seasons are not errors; they're the way God grows His people.
- **Verse to remember:** "Don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through." 1 Peter 4:12
- **Question to consider:** What season in my life have I been treating as an error, fighting it or running from it?
- **Season check:** If I accepted that this season is normal and purposeful, what resources would I start gathering to move forward?

Day 4 • Reverse Engineered

"And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." (Romans 8:28)

On Day 1, I told you about a moment when the Lord showed me He had "reverse engineered" my life. Today I want to explain what I mean.

Reverse engineering is the process of understanding how a device or system accomplishes a task by working backward from the finished product, often with very little insight into how it was actually built.

Normally an engineer starts with parts and builds toward a product. Reverse engineering starts with the product and works backward to understand the parts.

I believe that picture works in two directions in the life of a believer.

God started with the finished product

Paul goes on in Romans 8:29 to say that God "knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son."

Read that carefully. God didn't start with your circumstances and hope something good came out. He started with the end: you, conformed to the image of Jesus. Then He ordered the steps backward from there.

"Only I can tell you the future before it even happens," God says. "Everything I plan will come to pass" (Isaiah 46:10). He isn't figuring out your life as He goes. He sees the finished product, and He knows which seasons will form it.

That's why Romans 8:28 can say God causes "everything to work together for the good." Not because everything is good, but because God already knows what He's making.

We are the ones reverse engineering

Here's the second direction. Remember the definition: understanding how something works "with very little (if any) insight." That's us in the middle of a season. We can't see the blueprint. We only see pieces.

But as we walk with God, we start to look back and trace His hand. We take what He's formed in us and work backward to see how He did it.

Joseph is the clearest example in Scripture. He was betrayed by his brothers, sold as a slave, falsely accused and forgotten in prison. Nothing about those years looked like a plan. But standing on the other side, he could look his brothers in the eye and say, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me into this high position so I could save the lives of many people" (Genesis 50:20).

Joseph reverse engineered his own story. From the finished product, a saved nation, he could finally see why the pit and the prison had to come first.

Seated above it

You don't have to wait until the end of your life to start seeing this way. Ephesians 2:6 says God "raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms." You have a seat above your circumstances.

From ground level, a season of pain looks like a dead end. From the seat God gives you, it can look like a step in the design.

You may not understand every detail yet. But you can trust the One who started with the end in mind.

Try it

Today, look back at one hard season in your past that you've already come through. Ask yourself:

1. What did that season form in me that I didn't have before?
2. Who am I able to help now because I went through it?
3. If God started with who I am today, why might that season have been necessary?

You've just reverse engineered a piece of your own story. Over the next 45 days, you'll learn to do it with the season you're in right now.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** God started with the finished product, the likeness of His Son, and ordered my steps from there.
- **Verse to remember:** "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good." Genesis 50:20
- **Question to consider:** Looking back on a hard season I've come through, what did God form in me through it?
- **Season check:** If I trusted that God already sees the finished product, how would I walk through this season differently?

Day 5 • The Nine Seasons

"For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven." (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

You've seen why seasons matter. Today you get the map.

Over the next 45 days we'll walk through nine seasons of the Kingdom of God. Each one has a purpose, a biblical model who lived it, and a question God is asking in it. Here they are in one place:

Season	Days	Theme	Biblical model	What God is doing
Refinement	6-10	Divine Training	Job	Using pressure to train you, not punish you
Repentance	11-15	Orphans No More	The Prodigal Son	Bringing you home as a son or daughter
Revival	16-20	The Cost of Discipleship	Peter leaving his nets	Filling you with the Person of the Holy Spirit
Reformation	21-25	Make the Church Great Again	King Josiah	Rebuilding your life and church on His Word
Recalculate	26-30	Why Revival Tarries	Israel's 40 years	Rerouting you when your plan overrules His
Revolution	31-35	Driven by Eternity	Daniel	Sending you into your sphere to represent His Kingdom
Release	36-40	Divine Pruning	Paul and Barnabas	Cutting away what has finished its season
Reward	41-45	Surviving the Anointing	Joseph in Egypt	Testing your character with blessing

Season	Days	Theme	Biblical model	What God is doing
Repeat	46-50	Break the Cycle	Paul and Timothy	Making you a father or mother to the next generation

A few things to remember

The order isn't fixed. As we saw on Day 3, you don't climb these like stairs. You can land in any season through obedience, rebellion or someone else's choices.

You can be in more than one. You might be in Release in a relationship and Revolution at work at the same time.

Every season has a counterfeit. Each one has an "almost right" version that looks close to the truth but leads somewhere else. Refinement can be mistaken for punishment. Reward can be mistaken for God's final approval. Learning to tell the difference is a big part of discernment.

Every season can repeat. If you only survive a season instead of learning from it, don't be surprised if it comes back around. God is patient. He'll give you the test again.

Where are you?

You don't have to know your season today. But it's worth asking. As you look at the table, one or two rows may jump out at you. Pay attention to that. It might be the Holy Spirit pointing.

If you'd like help, there's a free 63-question assessment at chroniclesofareformer.com/questionnaire. Take it now, and take it again when you finish Day 50. The difference between the two may surprise you.

Tomorrow the journey begins with Refinement, and with a story about the day my plans broke.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Every season has a purpose, and every season has an "almost right" counterfeit.
- **Verse to remember:** "For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven." Ecclesiastes 3:1
- **Question to consider:** Which one or two seasons in the table stood out to me, and why?
- **Season check:** Am I in more than one season right now: one at home, one at work, one in my walk with God?

For Small Groups • Week 1 • Getting Started

Meet once after Day 5. Plan on about 60 to 90 minutes. This first meeting is about getting to know each other and naming where you are, not fixing anyone.

1. **Open:** Read Ecclesiastes 3:1 aloud. Ask each person to share, in one sentence, why they started this journey.
2. **Day 1:** What have you prayed for in the past few years? Where might God be answering in a form you didn't expect?
3. **Day 2:** Share a season you survived but didn't learn from. Did it come back around?
4. **Day 3:** Henry Cloud says our brains fight what they register as "errors." What season have you been treating as an error?
5. **Day 5:** Look at the table of the nine seasons together. Which one or two stood out to you? (Share only what you're comfortable sharing.)

Practice together: If everyone has a phone, take the 63-question assessment at chroniclesofareformer.com/questionnaire, or ask everyone to take it before you meet next week. Keep your results somewhere you can find them on Day 50.

A ground rule for the journey: Use the seasons to examine yourself first. Never diagnose someone else's season in front of the group unless they ask for your input.

Pray: In pairs, pray for each other by name: "Father, give my friend understanding of the times, and show them what to do in this season."

Week 2 · Refinement: Divine Training

Before you begin this week

For the next five days, we're going to walk through a season most of us would rather skip.

Refinement is the season of pressure. It's when the prayers seem to go unanswered, the plan falls apart, and the thing you were sure God promised looks further away than ever. It's also the season God uses more than almost any other to make you into the person your calling requires.

The model for this season is Job, a man who lost almost everything and still said, "But he knows where I am going. And when he tests me, I will come out as pure as gold" (Job 23:10). Job didn't understand his season while he was in it. But he knew the character of the One who was refining him, and that was enough to keep him from walking away.

Read one chapter a day. Don't rush ahead. Each day ends with four things to carry with you: a point to ponder, a verse to remember, a question to consider, and a season check. Write your answers down. The goal this week is not to finish a book. It's to let the Refiner do His work.

Day 6 • The Letters That Didn't Burn

By the end of my sophomore year of high school, the mail had started coming.

Letters arrived from major college football programs all over the country. Every week there seemed to be a new logo on an envelope. Then one day a letter came that I read more times than I can count: a handwritten note from a coach at one of the top programs in the nation. Not a form letter. Someone had sat down and written to me by hand.

I was at the pinnacle of everything I had worked for. My strength and athletic ability were peaking at exactly the right time. The path in front of me looked clear and wide, and I could see where it led.

Then, in May 1995, while I was playing basketball, I broke my tibia, and the fracture ran up into my knee joint.

In that moment, in my mind I saw a picture as clear as any photograph: all of those letters from all of those schools, stacked up and burning. Everything I had worked for, going up in smoke.

And then, just as clearly, a swift voice inside me said, *No. Don't think that. You will play again.*

I didn't hear it out loud. But I knew it wasn't my own thought, because my own thoughts were watching the letters burn.

The confusing months

The next three months were some of the most confusing of my young life. I had been told I would play again, and I believed it. But my leg wasn't healing the way I expected. Every week I waited for the progress that would confirm

what I'd heard, and every week it didn't come as fast as I thought it should.

When I finally sat down with the doctor, I asked him the only question I cared about: "When can I play football again?"

He looked at me and said, "People don't come back from this injury."

I can still remember how those words fell flat on my ears. It wasn't that I doubted his training. It's that he didn't know what I knew. I had a promise from God, so what he was saying couldn't be the final word.

But a promise doesn't skip the process. I missed my entire junior season. While my teammates played on Friday nights, I was learning to walk on that leg again. Nobody really guided my rehab. I taught myself with a boombox, a jump rope and whatever weights I could find, one stubborn rep at a time.

And the program that had written me by hand kept pursuing me. Even after the injury, even with a season missing from my film, they didn't let go. I didn't understand it then, but God was showing me something about His own faithfulness: He doesn't stop pursuing you because you've been broken.

Refined, not punished

Here's what I've had to come to terms with. There was no serious, habitual sin in my life at that point. I wasn't running from God. I wasn't being disciplined for some secret rebellion. If I had been, the injury might have made more sense to me.

Instead, God was sanctifying me. He was teaching me something in my teenage years that would anchor me for

the rest of my life: my personal weakness is a portal to God's strength.

That injury became my personal refiner's fire. And the fire didn't stop when I got back on the field. The break had left me with severe arthritis, and years later, when I was preparing for the professional draft, the team doctors flagged it. The same knee that "no one comes back from" now threatened my draft status.

It would have been easy to see that as the old wound coming back to finish the job. But by then I had learned something. The limitation wasn't there to destroy my future. It was there to keep me dependent. Every time that knee ached, it reminded me that I hadn't gotten here on my own strength, and I wouldn't go any further on it either.

I still carry the mark of that season. I've come to see it the way Paul saw his thorn: not as proof that God failed to heal me, but as a lifelong reminder that His grace is enough and His power works best in my weakness.

That's what refinement does. It teaches you that dependence is the door to the Promised Land.

What this week is about

Maybe you're living through your own version of that doctor's appointment. Someone with every reason to know has told you that people don't come back from what you're facing. Or maybe you believe God has spoken a promise over your life, but the healing isn't coming as fast as you thought it would.

Over the next four days, we're going to look at what God is doing in seasons like that. We'll see why He allows pressure, what your crown, cross and thorn are for, why tears matter to Him, and how He turns grapes into new wine and brings you out of the fire as gold.

The letters didn't burn. And whatever you're facing, the fire you're in isn't the end of your story either.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** My weakness can be the doorway to God's strength.
- **Verse to remember:** "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:9
- **Question to consider:** What promise in my life feels like it's burning right now?
- **Season check:** Is there something I've stopped believing God for because the healing is slower than I expected?

Day 7 • Training, Not Punishment

"I have refined you, but not as silver is refined. Rather, I have refined you in the furnace of suffering." Isaiah 48:10 (NLT)

You've probably heard someone say it at a funeral or in a hospital waiting room: "God won't give you more than you can handle." It sounds comforting. It sounds biblical. But it isn't in the Bible, and the apostle Paul would have disagreed with it.

Listen to how he described one of the hardest seasons of his ministry: "We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die" (2 Corinthians 1:8). That is not a man who was given only what he could handle. That is a man who was given far more.

But notice the very next sentence: "But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9).

There's the reason. God will give you more than you can handle. He will never give you more than *He* can handle. He lets you reach the end of yourself because the end of you is the beginning of His strength.

An upside-down Kingdom

In the natural world, growing up means becoming less dependent. A baby needs a parent for everything; an adult needs a parent for very little. We assume the spiritual life works the same way: the more mature we become, the less we should need God's help.

The Kingdom of God works the opposite way. The more you mature, the *more* dependent on God you become. And that shift is subtle. As God blesses you and your gifts grow, it

becomes easy to start trusting your own ability and forget that it was His Spirit carrying you all along. That's one reason seasons of refinement come. They are God's way of reminding you, before pride does real damage, that apart from Him you can do nothing (John 15:5).

Many people never reach their potential in God because they believe a quiet lie: that they're only called to do what they can accomplish with their own gifts and talents. You were never called to a life that small. God will put you in over your head, not because He is cruel, but because that's where real life with Him begins.

Training or punishment?

This is the most important question of the whole season, so settle it now: refinement is training, not punishment.

That can be hard to believe while you're in it. Sometimes it feels like God is destroying you when He is actually developing you. That's why we can't trust what we feel; we have to trust what we know. Feelings are circumstantial evidence. God's Word is eyewitness testimony.

Think about how many people in Scripture looked like failures on paper. Moses stuttered, yet he delivered a nation. Elijah sank into depression, yet God used him to bring down Jezebel. Gideon felt insecure, yet he became a general in the Lord's army. Lazarus was dead, and Jesus raised him. The facts were real. They just weren't the whole truth.

A boy once found a butterfly struggling to escape its cocoon. Wanting to help, he took scissors and cut the cocoon open. The butterfly came out easily, but its wings were weak and shriveled, and it never flew. What the boy didn't understand was that the struggle was the preparation. Squeezing

through that small opening was what would have made its wings strong.

We often wish God would cut us out of our cocoon. But the very pressure we're begging Him to remove may be what's preparing us to fly.

The promise no one preached

When Paul met Jesus, the first prophetic word spoken over his new life wasn't about prosperity or platform. The Lord told Ananias, "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:16). Later Paul and Barnabas told the young churches plainly, "We must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

We love to talk about the promises of God, but we rarely talk about the process it takes to reach them. When believers aren't told the truth about refinement, they assume their pain means God has abandoned them. Jesus promised purpose in our pain more than He promised comfort from it.

So if you're in a hard season right now, it may not mean you've done something wrong. It may mean God is doing something right. Sometimes it feels like you've been buried, when you've actually been planted.

Thinking About My Season

- **Point to ponder:** God will give me more than I can handle, but never more than He can handle.
- **Verse to remember:** "As a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead." 2 Corinthians 1:9
- **Question to consider:** Where am I asking God to cut me out of the cocoon instead of trusting what the struggle is building?

- **Season check:** Does my current hardship feel like punishment or training? What would change if I believed it was training?

Day 8 • Your Crown, Your Cross, Your Thorn

"When someone has been given much, much will be required in return." Luke 12:48 (NLT)

Every follower of Jesus carries three things at the same time: a crown, a cross and a thorn. Most of our frustration in hard seasons comes from confusing them, fighting God over the wrong one, or using one to escape the others.

Your crown

Your crown is what God has placed in your hands: your gifts, talents, influence, opportunities and resources. "To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability" (Matthew 25:15).

Your crown is not about competition. It's about calling. God gives each person a unique measure based on what they're called to accomplish in their generation, so your crown gives you authority in the areas He entrusted to you, not your neighbor's. It's not for self-promotion or identity. It's for His glory and the good of others. When God hands you a crown, He's saying, "I have equipped you. Steward what I gave you."

Your cross

Your cross is the hard circumstance you didn't choose but must carry with faith, trust and surrender. "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23).

Your cross might be a parent who wasn't there when you were growing up, a home marked by abuse, years of financial struggle, or a calling that costs you relationships. Its anthem sounds like this: *"I didn't sign up for this."*

But your cross is the place where your plan dies and God's purposes are formed in you. It builds perseverance, trust, obedience and character. God doesn't use your cross to break you. He uses it to build you into someone who looks like Jesus.

Your thorn

Your thorn is different from your cross. Your cross is usually external; your thorn is internal. It's an ongoing weakness or struggle, often hidden from people around you, that keeps you humble and dependent: anxiety, insecurity, an emotional wound, a recurring battle in your mind. Its anthem sounds like this: "*Lord, heal me of this.*"

Paul had one. He begged God three times to take it away. God's answer wasn't removal. It was this: "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul's thorn kept him from becoming proud of the extraordinary revelations he'd received. Your thorn does the same for you. It is not your identity. It is the place where His strength meets you.

How they work together

Your crown reveals your potential. Your cross shapes your character. Your thorn guards your heart. God uses all three to develop a believer who is strong, refined, surrendered and usable for His purposes.

And here's the principle that explains a lot of what you're going through: the greater the crown, the greater the crushing. Not because God is punishing you, but because spiritual authority must be guarded by self-control. Power without character always ends up serving the false god called "self."

The danger

What do Samson, Saul, David and Solomon have in common? Each of them used his crown to dull the pain of his cross or thorn, and in doing so let his own desires overrule God's will.

Samson had supernatural strength, but he spent it on his passions. Saul had a throne, but he used royal authority to cover his insecurity and jealousy. David had the heart of a worshiper, but in an idle season he used his power to take what wasn't his. Solomon had unmatched wisdom and wealth, and he used them to marry women who turned his heart to other gods.

When your cross feels too heavy and your thorn too painful, the temptation is to use your crown to open a door God told you to keep closed. That's the shortcut of this season, and it always costs more than it promises.

Peter once looked at John and asked Jesus, "What about him?" Jesus answered, "What is that to you? As for you, follow me" (John 21:21-22). Your crown, your cross and your thorn are tailored to you. Stop comparing them with anyone else's, and carry yours well.

Thinking About My Season

- **Point to ponder:** My crown reveals my potential, my cross shapes my character, and my thorn guards my heart.
- **Verse to remember:** "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:9
- **Question to consider:** Have I ever used my crown to numb the pain of my cross or thorn?
- **Season check:** Write down your crown, your cross and your thorn. Which one am I fighting God over right now?

Day 9 • The Gift of Tears

*"Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy."
Psalm 126:5 (NLT)*

Year after year, a woman named Hannah traveled with her family to worship at Shiloh, and year after year she came home with empty arms. Her husband's other wife had children and never let her forget it. Hannah would cry until she couldn't eat.

One year, after the sacrificial meal, she went to the tabernacle alone. She was in such deep anguish that her lips moved but no sound came out. Eli the priest watched her and decided she was drunk. "Must you come here drunk?" he demanded. "Throw away your wine!"

"Oh no, sir!" she answered. "I haven't been drinking. I was pouring out my heart to the LORD" (1 Samuel 1:14-15).

Think about that. The priest of Israel couldn't tell the difference between brokenness and drunkenness. It had been so long since Eli had come to the end of himself that he no longer recognized what it looked like in someone else.

God recognized it. Hannah's silent tears were liquid prayer, prayer beyond words, and God answered them with Samuel. And Samuel wasn't only an answer to Hannah's barrenness. Israel was spiritually barren too; "messages from the LORD were very rare" in those days (1 Samuel 3:1). Through one broken woman's tears, God birthed the prophet who would anoint David and turn a nation back to Him.

Bitter tears and the Gift of Tears

Hannah's story shows us there are two kinds of tears in a season of refinement.

Bitter tears worship the problem. They circle the loss, rehearse the injustice and say, "God, look what You let happen." The Gift of Tears worships the God of the breakthrough. It brings the same pain to the only One who can do something with it.

The tears may look identical. The direction is what's different.

This isn't about being an emotional person. Some of the strongest people you know rarely cry. It's about being a broken person. "The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God" (Psalm 51:17). God doesn't respond to human strength, influence or intellect nearly as quickly as He responds to a heart that has finally admitted it can't do this alone.

Try tears

In the early days of the Salvation Army, two young women labored for two years in a poor mill town and saw almost nothing happen. Exhausted and discouraged, they wrote to General William Booth and asked to be moved somewhere else. Booth sent back a telegram with two words: "Try tears."

They did. They gave themselves to travailing prayer, prayer with anguish in it, and revival came to that town. The road to revival is often paved with tears.

Weeping with others

The Gift of Tears isn't only for our own pain. It's also how we carry other people's pain.

When Jesus arrived at Lazarus's tomb, He knew He was about to raise him from the dead. He could have gone straight to the miracle. Instead, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35).

He entered Mary's grief before He changed her circumstances.

We tend to do the opposite. A friend loses someone, and we quickly remind them their loved one is in a better place, or that God works all things together for good. Those things are true. But spoken too soon, true words can wound. Weep with them first. When we carry someone's pain with the compassion of Jesus, our tears become an anointing that can break the yoke they're under.

What heaven keeps

If you've cried more in this season than you have in years, take heart. Scripture tells us God keeps three things. He keeps bowls of our prayers (Revelation 5:8). He keeps a book of remembrance of those who fear Him and talk about Him (Malachi 3:16). And He keeps a bottle of our tears: "You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle" (Psalm 56:8).

Not one of your tears is wasted. What earth overlooks, heaven records. And the greatest weepers often become the greatest reapers.

Thinking About My Season

- **Point to ponder:** Bitter tears worship the problem; the Gift of Tears worships the God of the breakthrough.
- **Verse to remember:** "You have collected all my tears in your bottle." Psalm 56:8
- **Question to consider:** When did I last weep with someone instead of trying to fix them?
- **Season check:** Are my tears in this season pointed at my problem, or at God?

Day 10 • From Grapes to Gold

"I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more." John 15:1-2 (NLT)

On the last night before the cross, Jesus chose to teach His disciples about grapes. Of all the pictures He could have used, He picked a vineyard. I don't think that was an accident.

If you owned a vineyard, how would you get the most value from your harvest? You wouldn't sell the grapes off the vine. You'd make wine. A grape left in its original form lasts a week or two. Wine can last for centuries. But to get from one to the other, a grape has to go through a process no grape would ever choose.

Grapes are one of the few fruits cultivated to be pruned, picked, trampled, crushed and then left in a dark place for a long time. If grapes could scream, the winepress would be a very loud place. But if they endure the pressure and the process, they become something that can be served to kings.

God loves you too much to leave you in your original form.

The four stages

Cleansing. Before anything else, the grapes are washed. "You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you," Jesus said (John 15:3). God's Word exposes what doesn't belong: the motives we hide, the attitudes we excuse, the sin we've grown comfortable with.

Cutting. Then comes the pruning. Notice which branches Jesus says get pruned: the ones that *do* bear fruit. You would think a fruitful branch would be left alone. But in

God's vineyard, pruning is the prize of faithfulness. It just doesn't feel like a prize. When God cuts, it feels like punishment, not promotion.

A boy once tried to prune his mother's rose bush the way he had seen her do it, and he cut it back so far it nearly died. "I was only doing what I saw you do," he said. His mother answered, "You weren't doing what I was doing, because I know how to cut." Sometimes God seems more like a slayer with a knife than a surgeon with a scalpel. That's when we have to lean on His goodness instead of our own perspective. He knows exactly where, when and how much to cut.

Crushing. Then the grapes are pressed. This is the stage that releases what's inside, and it's the stage that confuses us most. But Scripture doesn't hide it. Speaking of Jesus, Isaiah wrote, "It was the LORD's good plan to crush him and cause him grief" (Isaiah 53:10). If the Father allowed His own Son to be crushed for our redemption, it would be arrogant to think we will never be pressed.

That doesn't mean God causes every evil thing that happens to you. Allowing and causing are not the same. But it does mean nothing reaches you that He can't use. Every time you take Communion, you hold the evidence: bread made from grain that was crushed, wine made from grapes that were pressed.

Confinement. Finally, the juice is sealed away in the dark. Nothing seems to be happening. No one is watching. This is the hidden season, and it's where the real transformation happens. Moses felt the call to deliver Israel as a young man, acted in his own strength, and ended up a fugitive. Then God hid him in the wilderness for forty years. Just as a baby needs forty weeks in the dark to develop, Moses

needed forty years before God could trust him with a nation. When God hides you, He is equipping you.

The grape juice shortcut

Here's the temptation of this season: we want the ease of making Kool-Aid with the strength and value of wine. Grape juice is the almost-right answer. It's sweet, it's fast, and it skips the crushing. But it's gone in a season.

Grapes grow best in harsh soil and harsh weather. The struggle drives their roots deep. When God lets you live through hard and volatile circumstances, it isn't because He hates you. It's because He knows deep roots are what will hold you when the storm comes.

Your life is not easy because your oil is not cheap.

Into the refiner's fire

"He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross."
Malachi 3:3 (NLT)

A refiner of silver sits close to the fire. He can't walk away, because a few seconds too long in the flames will ruin the metal. He watches, skimming away the impurities as they rise to the surface. And how does he know when the silver is finished? When he can look into it and see his own reflection.

That's what God is after in your season of refinement. Not your destruction. His reflection.

But refinement doesn't work automatically. You can go through the fire and come out the same. The difference is whether you cooperate with the Refiner or resist Him.

What resisting looks like

Resistance in this season rarely looks like open rebellion. It usually looks like one of three things.

Defensiveness. Someone points out the very thing God has been dealing with, and instead of listening, you argue. "That's just how I am."

Pride. You decide you've already learned this lesson. You're too mature, too gifted or too experienced to need this kind of correction.

Avoiding the truth. You stay busy, stay distracted and stay away from the quiet place where God might put His finger on something.

And there's a fourth, subtler form of resistance: we lower our theology to match our pain. Instead of letting the fire change us, we change what we believe about God. "Maybe He isn't good. Maybe He doesn't keep His promises. Maybe I was foolish to trust Him."

Here is the sobering part. When we resist refinement, the test doesn't go away. It comes back, and it usually comes back with more pressure, because nothing was purified the first time. That is how an eleven-day journey becomes forty years in the wilderness.

Trauma or training?

Two people can walk through the same fire and come out with different stories. One calls it trauma. The other calls it training.

The difference isn't the pain; the pain is real for both. The difference is perspective. Without a vision of God's sovereignty, hardship looks like aimless suffering and injustice, and it traps us in cycles of victimhood and despair. But when we see our seasons as "Father-filtered" rather

than "Father-authored," we can say what Joseph said to the brothers who sold him: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good" (Genesis 50:20).

That isn't denial. Joseph's pain was real, and so was his brothers' sin. But God took what the enemy meant for evil and turned it into the training that would save a nation. It's what you might call collateral beauty: authority, wisdom and compassion that couldn't have come any other way. The oil pressed out of your crushing season can become healing for someone else's.

Decide in advance

When three young men faced Nebuchadnezzar's blazing furnace, they said something remarkable: "The God whom we serve is able to save us... But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods" (Daniel 3:17-18).

They had decided in advance that God was good, whatever the outcome.

That's the posture refinement is meant to produce. If you obey God because of the outcome you expect, you will often be disappointed. If you obey Him because of who He is, you will always be satisfied in the end, because somewhere in the process you'll discover that He Himself is your great reward.

Sometimes God delivers us *from* the fire. Sometimes He delivers us *through* it. And sometimes He meets us *in* it, as a fourth man walking in the flames. We don't get to choose which. We only get to choose whom we trust.

Coming forth as gold

Job never got an explanation for his suffering. What he got was an encounter: "I had only heard about you before, but

now I have seen you with my own eyes" (Job 42:5). That was worth more to him than every answer he had demanded.

If you're in the furnace right now, the Refiner hasn't left the room. He is sitting close to the fire, watching, waiting for the moment He sees His own reflection in you. When He has tested you, you will come forth as gold.

Thinking About My Season

- **Point to ponder:** God isn't after my destruction in this season. He's after His reflection.
- **Verse to remember:** "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold." Job 23:10
- **Question to consider:** Have I lowered my theology to match my pain?
- **Season check:** Am I cooperating with the Refiner or resisting Him? Is there a test that keeps coming back because I haven't let it purify me yet?

For small groups: Week 2 • Refinement

Meet once after everyone has read Days 6–10.

1. Which day hit closest to home this week, and why?
2. Where have you wished God would "cut you out of the cocoon"? What might the struggle have been building?
3. Which stage of the Winepress are you in right now: cleansing, cutting, crushing or confinement?
4. Share your crown, your cross and your thorn with one other person, if you're willing.
5. Have you ever lowered your theology to match your pain? What helped you, or could help you, come back?

Practice together: discuss an almost-right belief and the Scripture that helped you recognize the truth.

Pray: in pairs, ask God to make each other new wine, not grape juice, and to let each of you come forth as gold.

Week 3 · Repentance: Orphans No More

Day 11 • The Hypocrite Comes Home

"No man knows how bad he is until he has tried very hard to be good." — C. S. Lewis

I grew up in a big family, seven of us under one roof. After my mother gave birth to my twin sisters, complications followed. Her doctor warned my parents that another pregnancy could cost her life, so she had her tubes tied.

"We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps" (Proverbs 16:9). Despite the procedure, my mother became pregnant again. The doctor urged her to end the pregnancy. He called it a matter of life and death.

My parents refused. They believed that "children are a gift from the LORD" (Psalm 127:3), and they stood on it. My mother carried that baby to term, and my youngest sister was born.

I watched that sister grow up, earn a full scholarship to a top university, and go on to earn a law degree. Her life felt like living proof of Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." So I never questioned where I stood on abortion. It was sin. No questions asked.

What I didn't know yet was how much brokenness was hiding inside our "perfect Christian family." And I didn't know how much was hiding inside me.

The plan

I went to college at eighteen a virgin, determined to honor God. I didn't drink. I didn't smoke. I stayed away from temptation and clung to the convictions the Holy Spirit had

given me. My plan was simple: stay pure, marry my wife, and then have sex.

My dad's advice had been three words: "Wait until marriage." It was true, but it wasn't enough. No one ever explained why purity mattered beyond avoiding sin. No one showed me how to date. "The spirit is willing, but the body is weak" (Matthew 26:41).

My freshman year, I met a girl. We connected instantly, though we were both in relationships that weren't making us happy. I ended mine right away. She stayed in hers.

We kept pushing physical boundaries. The Holy Spirit kept speaking in a gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:12). I kept ignoring Him. Eventually, we crossed the line.

When His presence lifted

What followed was a fog of depression. I had felt that heaviness once before, in high school, after crossing lines with a girlfriend. Back then I wept before God with "a broken and repentant heart" (Psalm 51:17).

This time was different. This time I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit withdraw entirely.

For five months I wrestled with guilt. On the field, my performance soared. I had a two-sack game on the road against one of the top programs in the country. But my soul was withering. I prayed David's prayer: "Do not banish me from your presence" (Psalm 51:11).

I decided the fix was to marry her. If I made it right, maybe the heaviness would lift. But the relationship crumbled, and I walked away wounded.

The spiral

Wounded people make wounded choices. I got involved with another woman, someone I had admired for years, and lust and compromise consumed me. "The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). The enemy nearly succeeded.

Then my ex told me she was pregnant. I dismissed it as manipulation, until the tests confirmed it.

In that moment the Holy Spirit whispered two words: "Choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19). I heard Him. But fear and pain drowned Him out.

I paid for the abortion, and I pressured her into it over her protests.

I have to say that plainly, because repentance doesn't use soft words for hard things. The boy who was certain abortion was sin, the brother of a girl a doctor once wanted aborted, made that choice himself. No man knows how bad he is until he has tried very hard to be good.

The hypocrite

That decision plunged me into darkness. "Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?" (Romans 7:24).

I ended the other relationship, went back to my ex, and spiraled further down. I was convinced I had lost my salvation.

And here is the strangest part: I kept sharing Christ with other people. I offered them a forgiveness I didn't believe applied to me. I was a hypocrite, wearing a mask over a shame I couldn't say out loud.

This is what spiritual orphans do. We stay in the Father's house, but we live like servants. We keep working for Him while believing He has stopped wanting us.

Then grace

Grace found me through a mentor who had walked a road a lot like mine. He introduced me to the gospel of grace: "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God" (Ephesians 2:8).

I had believed the gospel for other people. Now I had to believe it for me.

Not long after, I stood up at a fellowship meeting for college athletes and confessed publicly. When I did, chains broke. Shame lives on secrecy. The moment my secret came into the light, it lost its grip.

Breaking the cycle

Later, I began dating the woman who would become my wife, and I vowed to God that the cycle would end with me.

We still had a pregnancy scare. I knelt in a restaurant bathroom and surrendered everything to God: "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Psalm 51:10).

The test came back negative. I married her anyway. It was a redeemed beginning.

The altar

Ten years after the abortion, I stood in front of a church and told the story I had hidden for a decade. I introduced it as "a hypocrite's story." Then I told them it was mine.

"But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness" (1 John 1:9).

When I finished, the altar flooded with repentant hearts. My confession became someone else's door.

Collateral beauty

The loss of my daughter exposed my depravity. Yet "as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant" (Romans 5:20).

Today I grieve, but I don't live in regret, because "God has made everything beautiful for its own time" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). My daughter waits for me in heaven, and I will meet her there. Not because I earned it, but because "the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

That is what I mean by collateral beauty. God did not cause my sin, and He did not waste it either. The thing I was most ashamed of became the thing He used to set others free. Repentance didn't erase my past. It handed my past to God, and He birthed something beautiful from it.

That is what this week is about. You don't come home by hiding better. You come home by telling the truth.

If This Is Your Story

Maybe you read this chapter and saw yourself in it. Maybe you had an abortion. Maybe you paid for one, drove someone to the clinic, or pressured someone the way I did. Maybe you've never told anyone.

Hear this first: you are not beyond redemption. The blood that cleansed me is the same blood that cleanses you, from all sin (1 John 1:7). Not most sin. All of it.

The enemy wants you to believe that hiding is safer than confessing. It isn't. Secrecy keeps you living like an orphan in your Father's house. Confession opens the door home.

And home is not the end of the story. When you bring your darkest moment to God in repentance, He doesn't just forgive it. He can redeem it. Your grief can become someone else's breakthrough, and your confession can become someone else's door. That is collateral beauty: not that the loss was good, but that God refuses to waste it.

You don't have to walk this alone. Many churches and pregnancy resource centers offer confidential post-abortion recovery groups, for women and for men. Find one, tell one safe person, and let God begin to make something beautiful out of what you've carried.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Repentance doesn't erase my past; it hands my past to God.
- **Verse to remember:** "But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness." 1 John 1:9
- **Question to consider:** Is there a secret I'm still keeping that has me living like an orphan in my Father's house?
- **Season check:** Who is one safe person I could tell the truth to this week?

Day 12 • Two Ways to Be an Orphan

"A man had two sons." (Luke 15:11)

Most of us know the story of the prodigal son. A younger son demands his inheritance early, moves to a distant land and wastes it all. Starving and feeding pigs, he finally comes to his senses and heads home, rehearsing a speech about becoming a hired servant. But while he's still a long way off, his father runs to him, embraces him and throws a party.

We usually stop there. Jesus didn't.

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working" (Luke 15:25). When he hears the music, he gets angry and refuses to go in. "All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to" (Luke 15:29).

The story of the prodigal son is really the tale of two orphan mindsets. One son left home. The other never left but was never really home. Both lived like orphans with a father who loved them.

The rebellious orphan

The younger son is the rebellious orphan. He wanted the Father's possessions more than the Father's presence. "I want my share of your estate now before you die" (Luke 15:12).

The rebellious orphan finds his joy in his personal dreams and individual liberties rather than trusting the Father's plan. He embraces his new identity in Christ but not his new responsibilities in Christ. He wants the rewards of a child of God without the responsibilities of a child of God.

And he treats God's Word the same way: he takes away from it. He keeps the verses about love and freedom and

quietly deletes the ones about holiness and obedience. Today we call that deconstruction.

The religious orphan

The older brother is the religious orphan. He would rather be in the fields doing ministry than in the Father's house doing family. He derives his happiness from his performance and position instead of the Father's presence.

He can't celebrate his brother's return because his whole relationship with his father is a contract: *I work, you pay*. "You never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends." He had been in his father's house for years and never once enjoyed it.

The religious orphan treats God's Word the opposite way: he adds to it. He builds fences around the commands and then fences around the fences. Today we call that legalism.

"Do not add to or subtract from these commands I give you" (Deuteronomy 4:2). The rebellious orphan subtracts. The religious orphan adds. A true son or daughter simply obeys, and has the courage to challenge the traditions of men when they've replaced the Word of God.

Two kinds of counterfeit grace

The rebellious orphan exchanges costly grace for *cheap* grace: grace as a license to keep living however he wants. The religious orphan exchanges costly grace for *earned* grace: grace he believes he deserves because of how hard he's worked.

Here's the simplest way I know to say it: **The religious orphan doesn't know the love of God. The rebellious orphan doesn't know the fear of the Lord.**

Think of it like football. The religious orphan is the player who thinks the whole point of the game is to follow the rules, and never produces anything. The rebellious orphan is the player who ignores the playbook to pad his own stats, and costs the team the game. Neither one is playing for the coach.

Who Jesus was talking to

Here's what surprised me most. Jesus didn't tell this story to gather prodigals. Luke 15 opens with the Pharisees complaining that Jesus was "associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!" Jesus told all three stories, the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son, to the older brothers in the room.

That means the story ends with a question that's never answered. The father is standing outside the party, begging his older son to come in. We never find out if he did.

The question is left open because it's addressed to us.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** The religious orphan doesn't know the love of God; the rebellious orphan doesn't know the fear of the Lord.
- **Verse to remember:** "Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours." Luke 15:31
- **Question to consider:** Do I lean more toward the younger son or the older brother? Do I tend to subtract from God's Word or add to it?
- **Season check:** Am I outside the Father's house right now, or inside it but refusing to enjoy it?

Day 13 • Washing the Windows

"So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, 'Abba, Father.'" (Romans 8:15)

There's a scene in the 1982 movie *Annie* that I've never been able to forget.

Oliver Warbucks, a billionaire, agrees to let an orphan stay at his mansion for a week. Annie is chosen. She walks into a house bigger than anything she's ever imagined, full of servants, marble floors and staircases.

When she's asked what she'd like to do first, she answers right away: wash the windows. Then the stairs.

Warbucks's secretary laughs and tells her that won't be necessary. She's a guest.

Why was the first thing Annie wanted to do when she arrived at the father's house to go to work?

Because an orphan always works to *receive* love. A son or daughter works *from* a place of being loved.

In the house, but still in the orphanage

That scene describes so many believers. We've been adopted. Legally, we live in the Father's house. But our hearts still believe we're in the orphanage.

So we grab a bucket and start washing windows. We serve to earn our place. We read our Bibles to stay in good standing. We feel close to God when we perform well and distant when we fail. We call it devotion, but underneath it is fear: *If I stop working, maybe He'll send me back.*

Paul wrote to believers who were doing exactly that. "God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, 'Abba, Father.' Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child" (Galatians 4:5-7).

You are not a guest who has to earn the room. You are not a servant who has to earn the meal. You are a child who belongs at the table.

Orphan or child?

Here is how the two mindsets show up in everyday life:

	The orphan mindset	The spirit of adoption
How I see God	A master to please	A safe place and a Father I depend on
Why I serve	To earn favor or impress others	Out of gratitude for being loved
Why I pursue purity	I <i>must</i> be holy to keep His favor	I don't want anything to hinder our closeness
How I see others' success	Competition, rivalry, jealousy	I can rejoice in their blessing
How I handle others' failures	Expose them to make myself look better	Love covers; I seek to restore
How I take correction	I get defensive and close my spirit	I see it as a blessing that sets me free
Where I find comfort	Busyness, escapism, counterfeit affections	Quiet time resting in the Father's presence
Daily motto	"Fight for what you can get."	"The blood of Jesus and the Spirit of adoption empower me to change the world!"

Most of us will see ourselves on both sides of that table. That's all right. Repentance isn't pretending you're already fully on the right side. It's turning, one area at a time, from the orphan's way of living to the child's.

Put the bucket down

The Father isn't asking you to stop serving. He's asking you to change *why* you serve. When you know you're loved, the same work that used to exhaust you becomes worship.

So today, put the bucket down. Sit at the table. Let the Father enjoy you before you do anything for Him.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** An orphan works to receive love; a child works from a place of being loved.
- **Verse to remember:** "Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child." Galatians 4:7
- **Question to consider:** Where am I still "washing the windows," serving God to earn a place I already have?
- **Season check:** Looking at the table, which row describes me most as an orphan? What would it look like to live that area as a child?

Day 14 • A Tale of Three Fathers

"Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow." (James 1:17)

Martin Luther, the man God used to spark the Reformation, once admitted something surprising. He said he had trouble praying the Lord's Prayer, because whenever he said "Our Father," he thought of his own father, who was hard, unyielding and relentless. He couldn't help but think of God that way.

He isn't alone. **How you see your earthly father is often how you see your heavenly Father.**

If your father was absent, God can feel distant. If he was harsh, God can feel like a cosmic policeman. If he was inconsistent, God can feel unreliable. And even a good father can accidentally become the thing we lean on instead of God.

My own lie

When I was honest about my own dad, I found a lie I had believed about God because of him: *I have to be my own provider.*

I watched what happened when money wasn't stewarded well, and something in me decided I couldn't fully trust anyone to provide, not even God. I'll tell you more about that on Day 43.

But my dad's mistakes also taught me one of the most powerful truths I know: obedience is better than sacrifice. And honoring him today looks like learning from both the good and the bad he did.

"What do You think of me?"

One Sunday night, a close friend confessed to me that he was drowning in shame and isolation. He couldn't receive God's love. I felt prompted to try something, so I asked him to pray a simple question out loud: *"Father God, what do You think of me?"*

He answered immediately: "Disappointed."

I asked, "Where did you learn that?"

His eyes widened. "From my dad."

His father had constantly picked on him, and the shame had followed him for years, right into his relationship with God. That night I walked him through forgiving his dad, naming the lie and releasing it to Jesus. The heaviness lifted. From that night on he began to hear God's voice more clearly, and in the years since, he has become a strong prophetic voice in the body of Christ.

Three fathers

I first saw this picture clearly while watching a TV series about a young hero with three father figures: the true father who loved him, the adoptive father who raised him, and a mentor who turned out to be his greatest enemy. I realized every one of us has the same three fathers.

	Who He Is	What We're Called to Do	The Trap
Father God	The perfect Father who never changes (James 1:17)	Trust, obey and worship	Distrust, offense and disappointment
Your earthly father	The man God used to give you life	Honor, observe and learn	Wrath, blind loyalty or dishonor
The false father	"A liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44)	Resist, flee and stay watchful	Trusting his voice and tolerating his lies

The trouble starts when we get them mixed up. We give the false father's lies the trust that belongs to God. We give our earthly father the authority to define us that belongs only to God. Or we blame God for wounds our earthly father caused.

Having a good or bad father doesn't determine your journey. But how you see these three fathers will shape your destiny.

Honor is not the same as trust

One more thing matters here. Honoring your father doesn't mean pretending he was perfect, and it doesn't mean giving him unlimited access to your life. "Honor your father and mother" is a command with a promise (Ephesians 6:2-3). But honor and trust are not the same.

You can forgive a father who hurt you and still keep healthy boundaries. You can honor what he did right, learn from what he did wrong, and refuse to let either one define you. Forgiveness is a gift you give. Trust is something that has to be rebuilt.

And if your earthly father was absent or worse, hear this: "Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD will hold me close" (Psalm 27:10). God is a "Father to the fatherless" (Psalm 68:5). You are a product of your past, but you are not a prisoner to it.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** How I see my earthly father is often how I see my heavenly Father.
- **Verse to remember:** "Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD will hold me close." Psalm 27:10

- **Question to consider:** What is the biggest lie I've believed about God because of my dad? What is the most powerful truth I learned from his mistakes?
- **Season check:** Pray the question my friend prayed: "Father God, what do You think of me?" Write down the first answer that comes. Does it sound like Him, or like someone else?

Day 15 • My Truth or the Truth

"There is a path before each person that seems right, but it ends in death." (Proverbs 14:12)

When I was a kid, my brother and I played the original Super Mario Bros. The game has eight worlds with four levels each, 32 stages in all. There's even a secret warp that lets you skip ahead.

I hadn't beaten it. But I told my brother I had, and when he asked how, I insisted the game "only had five levels."

It's funny now. But it's also exactly how many of us treat God's truth. Rather than admit how much we haven't conquered, we shrink the game. We redraw the map to match how far we've gotten, and then call it finished.

Where "my truth" began

The first temptation in the Bible wasn't really about fruit. It was about who gets to define good and evil.

The serpent opened with a question: "Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?" (Genesis 3:1). That's the rebellious orphan's voice. It subtracts from what God said by doubting it.

But notice Eve's answer. She said God told them, "You must not eat it or even touch it" (Genesis 3:3). God never said anything about touching it. That's the religious orphan's voice. It adds to what God said.

Both voices led to the same place. After the fall, humanity no longer just *chose* between good and evil. We started *deciding* what good and evil were. As Mark Hart put it, "God didn't give Adam and Eve the right to decide what was good and evil. He gave them the right to choose between good and evil."

That's where "my truth" was born.

Everyone doing what seems right

The book of Judges ends with a sentence that sounds like it could be written about today: "In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

Today we call it *my truth* and *your truth*. It sounds humble and kind. But when everyone is their own king, nobody can tell you that you're lost, and a path that "seems right" can lead somewhere deadly without anyone noticing.

Pilate stood face to face with Jesus and asked the question of our age: "What is truth?" (John 18:38). The answer was standing right in front of him. Jesus had already said it: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Truth isn't a preference. Truth is a Person.

What repentance really means

This is why truth belongs in a week about repentance. The New Testament word for repentance means a change of mind. To repent is to stop defending *my truth* and agree with God about *the* truth: about my sin, about His grace, about who He is and who I am.

The orphan always wants to keep control of the definitions. The child trusts the Father to define them.

Here's a simple test: **If your theology has not changed your life, you'd better change your theology.**

Coming home

Over the past five days you've seen what it looks like to come home. You've seen my worst moment and the grace

that met me there. You've seen the two sons who both missed the Father's heart, the orphan with a bucket in the mansion, the three fathers, and the lie of "my truth."

Repentance isn't the Father pushing you away. It's the road back to His house. And the Father is already watching the road.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Truth isn't a preference; truth is a Person.
- **Verse to remember:** "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." John 14:6
- **Question to consider:** Where have I "shrunk the game," redefining God's truth to match how far I've gotten?
- **Season check:** Is there an area of my life where I've been living by my truth instead of the truth? What would it look like to change my mind and agree with God today?

For Small Groups • Week 3 • Repentance

Meet once after Day 15. This week touches tender places, especially Day 11 and Day 14. Leaders, go first in sharing, keep what's shared in the room, and never pressure anyone to tell more than they want to.

1. **Open:** Read Luke 15:20 aloud. Ask: when have you experienced the Father "running" toward you?
2. **Day 11:** The story ends with collateral beauty, something good God brought out of something broken. Without sharing details you're not ready to share, where have you seen God do that in your life?
3. **Day 12:** Do you lean more toward the younger son or the older brother? Do you tend to take away from God's Word or add to it?
4. **Day 13:** Look at the orphan and child table together. Which row was hardest to read about yourself?
5. **Day 14:** If you're comfortable, share one lie you've believed about God because of your dad, and one truth you learned from his mistakes.
6. **Day 15:** Where have you been living by "my truth" instead of the truth?

Practice together: Take two minutes of silence. Have everyone quietly pray, "Father God, what do You think of me?" Then invite anyone who wants to share what they sensed. If someone hears something harsh or shaming, gently remind them that's not His voice, and pray with them.

Pray: In pairs, pray Galatians 4:7 over each other by name: "You are no longer a slave but God's own child."

Week 4 • Revival

Day 16 • He Speaks

"But if all of you are prophesying, and unbelievers or people who don't understand these things come into your meeting, they will be convicted of sin and judged by what you say. As they listen, their secret thoughts will be exposed, and they will fall to their knees and worship God, declaring, 'God is truly here among you.'" (1 Corinthians 14:24-25)

After years of dysfunction, I finally broke off an engagement with a young woman I had dated on and off throughout college. My mentor challenged me to start praying for my future wife. I was determined to stop the cycle of compromise and start living a life that reflected biblical Christianity.

We often think we know what we need to be a catalyst for change. Only God does.

A stranger at lunch

One day, right before a workout, I went to grab a bite to eat. A woman saw me pray over my food and came over to ask if I was a Christian. Then she asked if she could pray for me.

"Of course," I said.

She put her hands on me and started speaking in tongues. My first thought was, *Oh no. One of those Christians my dad warned me about.*

Then, while she was praying, she said, "I see you worshiping God with tears streaming down your face. Praise God."

I froze. How could she know that?

Then she said, "You've been praying for a wife."

Stunned again, I asked how she could possibly know. She went on to describe what my future wife would look like. Then she told me I was at a crossroads, which I absolutely was.

The crossroads

The question in front of me was simple and serious. Would I keep living in the wilderness of disobedience, or would I break the cycle and walk into the promised land of purpose?

Then she said one last thing, and I thought, *This has to be fake.*

"You will be a successful businessman."

In my head, I chuckled. She looked at me as if she had heard my thoughts and said, "No. If you *want* to be, you will be a successful businessman."

That one word, *if*, has stayed with me. God wasn't announcing a fate. He was extending an invitation. A prophetic word reveals what's possible in God, but it still waits for an answer from us.

Joyful and upset

I walked away from that encounter both joyful and upset. Joyful, because God had just shown me that He saw my tears, heard my prayers and knew exactly where I stood. Upset, because I had grown up in church, and no one had ever told me God still spoke like this.

Little did I know, I had just received my first prophetic word. My life as a believer would never be the same.

By the book

Many churches declare, "We do things by the book." They mean that everything they do follows what the Bible says.

My question is simple: Have you read the book?

Because the book says that when the church gathers and people prophesy, the secrets of a heart are brought into the light, and the person who hears falls down and declares, "God is truly here among you." That is exactly what happened to me at a lunch table. A stranger read the secrets of my heart, and I walked away knowing God was real, near and still speaking.

That is what revival looks like. It isn't hype or noise. It's the Holy Spirit doing today what He did in the book of Acts: speaking, convicting, comforting and calling people out of the wilderness into their purpose.

This week, we're going to meet the Person who makes that possible. Not an "it," not a force, but the Holy Spirit Himself. And we're going to ask an honest question: if we really do things by the book, why do so many of us live as if He stopped speaking?

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** God still speaks, and He knows the secrets of my heart better than I do.
- **Verse to remember:** "They will fall to their knees and worship God, declaring, 'God is truly here among you.'" 1 Corinthians 14:25
- **Question to consider:** Have I built my beliefs about the Holy Spirit on the Bible, or on what I was warned about?
- **Season check:** What crossroads am I standing at right now: the wilderness of disobedience or the promised land of purpose?

Day 17 • A Person, Not a Power

"But in fact, it is best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the Advocate won't come. If I do go away, then I will send him to you." (John 16:7)

In my first year in the NFL, the team chaplain handed me a book: *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* by R. A. Torrey.

I had grown up in church. I had prayed, sung and served for years. But somewhere in those pages I stopped and thought, *Wait. The Holy Spirit is God?*

I knew the words of the Trinity. I just had never really thought of the Holy Spirit as Someone. In my mind He was more like a force, a feeling or a spiritual battery you charged up at church.

Not an "it"

Torrey put it in a way I've never forgotten:

"If we think of the Holy Spirit as so many do as merely a power or influence, our constant thought will be, 'How can I get more of the Holy Spirit?' But if we think of Him in the biblical way as a divine Person, our thought will rather be, 'How can the Holy Spirit have more of me?'" — R. A. Torrey

That one sentence changes everything. You *use* a power. You *relate to* a person.

Scripture shows us that the Holy Spirit has a personality. He thinks: "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). He speaks (Acts 1:16). He grieves (Ephesians 4:30). He decides which gifts each person receives (1 Corinthians 12:11). He was there in the very first verses of

the Bible, as "the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters" (Genesis 1:2).

It's hard to love someone you don't fully know. And many believers have never been introduced to the Holy Spirit as a Person who wants a relationship with them.

Better than Jesus being here?

Read Jesus' words from today's verse again. He told His disciples it was *better* for them that He leave, because then the Holy Spirit would come.

Think about how shocking that is. The disciples had walked with Jesus in the flesh for three years. What could possibly be better than that? Only this: God not just *with* them, but *in* them, everywhere they went.

Jesus knew that His life, miracles, death and resurrection were not enough by themselves to launch the church. He knew human zeal, discipline and love would run out. So He told His disciples, "Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised" (Acts 1:4).

If they couldn't change the world without the Holy Spirit, why do we think we can?

How can He have more of me?

Revival begins here. Not with a louder service or a bigger crowd, but with a simple shift in your prayers. Stop asking only, "How can I get more of the Holy Spirit?" Start asking, "Holy Spirit, how can You have more of me?"

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** You use a power; you relate to a Person.

- **Verse to remember:** "It is best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the Advocate won't come." John 16:7
- **Question to consider:** Have I been treating the Holy Spirit like a force to use or a Person to know?
- **Season check:** Pray Torrey's question today: "Holy Spirit, how can You have more of me?" What area of my life comes to mind first?

Day 18 • Four Glasses of Milk

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere." (Acts 1:8)

When I teach on the Holy Spirit, I sometimes bring a bottle of chocolate syrup and a few glasses of milk.

First, I pour some syrup onto a spoon and hand it to a volunteer. They get a taste of chocolate, but they're still holding a spoon.

Next, I drizzle syrup down the *outside* of a glass of milk. It looks impressive for a moment, but nothing happens to the milk. It's still white.

Then I pour syrup *into* a glass of milk, but I don't stir it. The chocolate is really in there. It's sitting at the bottom. But if you looked at the glass from across the room, you'd still say it was milk.

Finally, I pour syrup into the last glass and stir. Now, and only now, you have chocolate milk.

Four ways to relate to the Spirit

Those four glasses picture four different ways people relate to the Holy Spirit:

Glass	What happens	In Scripture
The spoon	<i>Encountering</i> the Spirit: a real taste of God's presence	"I will pour out my Spirit upon all people" (Acts 2:17)
Syrup on the outside	<i>Influenced by</i> the Spirit: He comes upon a person for a moment or a task	"The Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon Samson" (Judges 15:14)
In, but not stirred	<i>Sealed with</i> the Spirit: He lives in you as God's child	"He breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:22)

Glass	What happens	In Scripture
Stirred	<i>Filled or baptized with the Spirit: He saturates and empowers your whole life</i>	"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you" (Acts 1:8)

The first two glasses describe people who have tasted God or been used by Him without truly belonging to Him. That's why Jesus warned that some will say, "Lord! Lord!" and point to their ministry, yet He will say He never knew them (Matthew 7:21-23). You can embrace the *works* of the Holy Spirit without embracing the *will* of the Holy Spirit.

The third glass is a true child of God. The Spirit is really in you; "he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 1:13). But in my opinion, a large part of the church lives right there: sealed but unstirred. Saved, but looking from across the room like everyone else.

Why they had to wait

The disciples were already believers when Jesus breathed on them in John 20. Yet a few weeks later He still told them to wait in Jerusalem: "John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5).

They had the Spirit. Now they needed to be filled with Him. And when it happened at Pentecost, a handful of frightened fishermen turned the world upside down.

Stir the glass

The Holy Spirit is not asking to visit your life or sit at the bottom of it. He wants to fill every part of it, until people looking from across the room can tell the difference.

Revival isn't when you cry. Revival is when you change.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** You can embrace the works of the Holy Spirit without embracing the will of the Holy Spirit.
- **Verse to remember:** "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses." Acts 1:8
- **Question to consider:** Which of the four glasses best describes my life right now?
- **Season check:** If someone watched my life from across the room this week, would they see milk or chocolate milk? What area most needs to be "stirred"?

Day 19 • The Silent Divorce

"For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24)

R. T. Kendall once described something he saw happening across the church:

"There has been a silent divorce in the church, speaking generally, between the Word and the Spirit. When there is a divorce, sometimes the children stay with the mother, sometimes with the father. In this divorce you have those on the Word side and those on the Spirit side." — R. T. Kendall

I've seen both sides of that divorce up close.

Two kinds of children

On one side are churches that love the Word. They study it, defend it and preach it carefully. But many of them are nervous about the Holy Spirit. I once sat in a church meeting where a pastor was questioned about why he had prayed at the beginning of his message, as if asking for God's help were something unusual. I was even teased for being too open to the Holy Spirit.

On the other side are churches that love the Spirit. They want power, presence and prophecy. But many are hungry to be stimulated with words of blessing without being shaped by the truth of God's Word. As one prophetic leader put it, too many want to be tickled with promises of destiny and wealth rather than provoked into holiness.

The Word side can end up with form but no power. The Spirit side can end up with power but no truth. Both are children of a divorce God never wanted.

Jesus didn't give us a choice between them. The Father is looking for worshipers who worship "in spirit and in truth." Not one or the other. Both.

What we really want

Here's a question I have to keep asking myself: *We want more power, but do we want more conviction? We want more healing, but do we want more consecration?*

The Word without the Spirit makes us dry. The Spirit without the Word makes us dangerous. "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives" (2 Timothy 3:16). The same Spirit who inspired the Book is the One who brings it to life in us.

Actors or disciples

There's a third thing that quenches the Spirit: turning church into a show. When everything is scripted down to the minute and built to keep a crowd entertained, there's little room left for God to interrupt.

Think about how we often measure a successful church: attendance, dollars donated, programs offered, staff hired, square footage. By those standards, Jesus would be considered an unsuccessful pastor. His crowd shrank to twelve, and then to almost none.

A church culture that values entertainment over character will make actors instead of disciples.

When the Holy Spirit leads

In 1906, a revival broke out in a small building on Azusa Street in Los Angeles. An observer wrote that there were no instruments, no choir, no offerings and no advertising, yet people came from everywhere, because "the Holy Ghost is

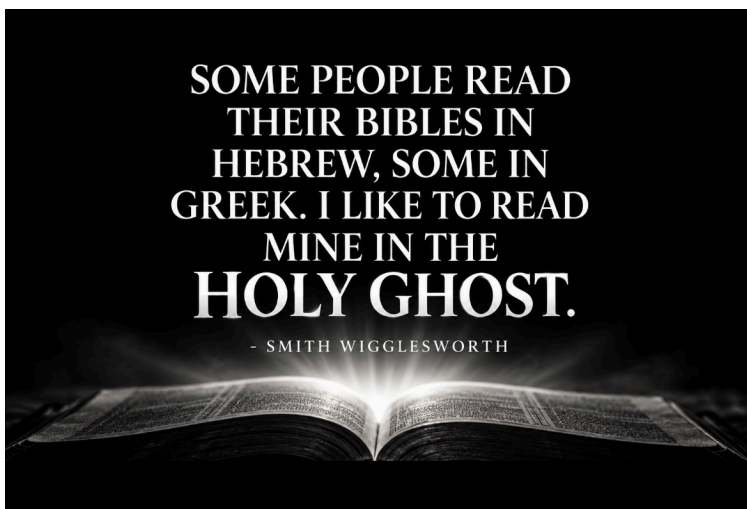
the leader." Proud, well-dressed preachers who came to investigate often ended up on their faces on the dirty floor, asking God to make them like little children.

One of the men who witnessed it, Frank Bartleman, said the Lord told him, "If you were only small enough, I could do anything with you."

That's the secret of every revival. Not a bigger platform, but a smaller self. Not the Word *or* the Spirit, but a people humble enough to be led by both.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** The Word without the Spirit makes us dry; the Spirit without the Word makes us dangerous.
- **Verse to remember:** "Those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." John 4:24
- **Question to consider:** Do I lean toward the Word side or the Spirit side of the divorce?
- **Season check:** Do I want more power, or more conviction? More healing, or more consecration? What would it look like to be "small enough" for God to use?



Day 20 • Re-digging the Ancient Wells

"Isaac reopened the wells his father had dug, which the Philistines had filled in after Abraham's death. Isaac also restored the names Abraham had given them." (Genesis 26:18)

As I was studying the great revivals of the past, I felt the Lord speak to my spirit: *It's time to dig up the ancient wells.*

In Genesis 26, Isaac returns to the land where his father Abraham had lived. The wells Abraham dug, the sources of life in a dry land, had been stopped up by the Philistines. Isaac didn't dig new wells first. He reopened the old ones and gave them back their original names.

God's wells don't run dry. They get filled in.

The well of the seven

Abraham named one of those places Beersheba. It's usually translated "well of the oath," but it can also mean "well of the seven." I'm told there are still several ancient wells around Beersheba today.

Seven is God's number of completeness. In heaven, John saw "seven torches with burning flames. This is the sevenfold Spirit of God" (Revelation 4:5). And Isaiah described what the Holy Spirit would look like resting on the Messiah: "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD" (Isaiah 11:2).

Those are the seven ancient wells. Here is what each one gives us:

The well	What it gives
The Spirit of the LORD	Dependence: Christ living in you, the life of God that raised Jesus from the dead
The Spirit of wisdom	Knowing what to do and <i>when</i> to do it, because timing can matter as much as the method
The Spirit of understanding	Revelation: God's blueprint, bringing hidden things to light
The Spirit of knowledge	Interpretation: decoding what God shows you, and knowing His heart and ways
The Spirit of counsel	Application: God's specific plan of action, waiting on Him before acting
The Spirit of might	God's power bringing to pass what He told you to do
The fear of the LORD	A holy awe that keeps all the others pure

Think of how Joshua took Jericho. The Spirit of counsel gave him a strange plan: march around the walls for seven days. Joshua's job was just to show up and obey. And on the seventh day, the Spirit of might brought the walls down. Joshua didn't push them over. He walked, and God moved.

What filled the wells

The Philistines filled Abraham's wells with dirt. What fills them today?

I believe we've let the "wisdom" of this world fill in the ancient wells. We trust programs more than prayer, strategy more than the Spirit, and the fear of man more than the fear of the Lord. The wells are still there. They're just buried.

Revival is not inventing something new. It's re-digging what God has already given.

Holy Spirit, come

Some believers get uncomfortable when someone prays, "Holy Spirit, come." After all, isn't God everywhere already? He is. But His presence isn't *welcome* everywhere. And He doesn't force His way into places that don't want Him.

So this week ends with an invitation. Not to a feeling or an experience, but to a Person. Pick up a shovel. Ask Him which well in your life has been filled in. And pray the simplest prayer of every revival in history:

Holy Spirit, come.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** God's wells don't run dry; they get filled in.
- **Verse to remember:** "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD." Isaiah 11:2
- **Question to consider:** Which of the seven wells do I most need re-dug in my life right now?
- **Season check:** What has filled in the wells in my life: busyness, the fear of man, the wisdom of this world? What's one shovelful I can remove this week?

For Small Groups • Week 4 • Revival

Meet once after Day 20. This week is about getting to know the Holy Spirit as a Person. Leave room in your meeting for Him to lead, even if it means not finishing every question.

1. **Open:** Read John 16:7 aloud. Ask: why would Jesus say it was *better* for Him to leave?
2. **Day 16:** Has anyone ever spoken something to you that only God could have known? How did it affect you?
3. **Day 17:** Before this week, did you think of the Holy Spirit more as a power or as a Person?
4. **Day 18:** Which of the four glasses best describes your life right now? (Be honest, and be kind to one another.)
5. **Day 19:** Do you lean toward the Word side or the Spirit side of the "silent divorce"? What would balance look like for you?
6. **Day 20:** Which of the seven wells do you most need re-dug?

Practice together: Spend five minutes in quiet. Pray together, simply, "Holy Spirit, come." Then ask, "Holy Spirit, what are You saying to us?" Invite people to share anything they sense, and weigh it together against Scripture.

This week: Spend 15 minutes each day asking the Holy Spirit, "What are You saying?" Write down what you hear and bring it next time.

Pray: In pairs, pray Torrey's question over each other: "Holy Spirit, have more of my friend."

Week 5 · Reformation

Day 21 • Where's Your Helmet?

"When we exchange traditions for truth, we become ill-equipped for the enemy's attacks and the weapons formed against us."

One of my teammates and I played three years in the NFL together. One Sunday, in the chaos of the moment, he ran onto the field without his helmet.

A defensive lineman hollered at him: "Where's your helmet?" He stopped, flushed with embarrassment, and bolted back to the sideline.

The play made the highlights for weeks. Fans laughed. Announcers replayed it. The moment became entertainment.

Observers or participants

Later that week I sat in church and couldn't stop thinking about that clip. Paul's instruction to the Corinthians came to mind:

"When you meet together, one will sing, another will teach, another will tell some special revelation God has given, one will speak in tongues, and another will interpret what is said. But everything that is done must strengthen all of you." (1 Corinthians 14:26)

When the church comes together, everyone is supposed to come prepared to contribute, so the whole body is built up. That is the difference between cultural church and biblical church. Cultural church is about coming to a place to observe. Biblical church is a gathering where each person arrives equipped and ready to participate.

My teammate only forgot his helmet in a game. How many Christians forget to put on the full armor of God?

*"Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil... Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness. For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared. In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."
(Ephesians 6:11, 14-17)*

"It's not your birthday"

God had already been dealing with me about this. A couple of years earlier, I reluctantly went to a birthday celebration at a farm-to-table restaurant. It wasn't my kind of food, and I felt a wave of annoyance.

Then came a gentle rebuke from the Lord: "It's not your birthday."

In that moment I saw how I had been approaching church. I came as a consumer, focused on what I could get rather than what I could give to God. The early church wasn't like that. "All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). That was a community of contribution, not consumption.

The shift God was asking for was from "What's in it for me?" to King David's resolve: "I will not present burnt offerings to the LORD my God that have cost me nothing" (2 Samuel 24:24).

A house of prayer

The helmet clip and the birthday rebuke came together in one verse. When Jesus walked into the temple, He drove out the merchants and overturned the tables of the money

changers. Then He said, "The Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer,' but you have turned it into a den of thieves" (Matthew 21:13).

That was reformation. Jesus wasn't renovating a building. He was restoring its purpose.

A marketplace is full of people who come to buy, sell and watch. A house of prayer is full of people who come to seek God and carry one another. In a marketplace you are a customer. In a house of prayer you are a participant.

Prayer is the life-source of everything the early church devoted itself to: the teaching, the fellowship, the meals and the power that followed. When prayer moves from preference to priority, the church stops being a show and becomes a house again.

God showed me His desire to transform the expression of Christianity in one generation. Reformation doesn't start with a new program. It starts when the church becomes a house of prayer again, where every believer walks in with the helmet on and a gift in hand.

Come ready

My teammate's mistake was funny because it happened in a game. In the life of faith, it isn't funny. It's dangerous.

His helmet moment reminded me to come to church prepared to participate, not to consume or be entertained. When everyone brings their gift with boldness and order, and each believer comes wearing the full armor, especially the helmet of salvation, the whole body is built up. "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (1 Corinthians 14:33).

That is how we become an army of believers, ready to equip the body and prepared for the game called life. The

alternative is to stay vulnerable and unprepared for the cost of discipleship.

That is what this week is about. Reformation is not a protest against the church. It is a return to what the church was always meant to be: a house of prayer.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Church is not a place I come to watch; it's a house I come to pray and build.
- **Verse to remember:** "My Temple will be called a house of prayer." Matthew 21:13
- **Question to consider:** Do I come to church as a consumer or as a contributor?
- **Season check:** What could I bring the next time the church gathers, and which piece of armor have I been leaving on the sideline?

Day 22 • Death by Idealism

"No, O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

When I retired from the NFL, I suddenly had a lot more free time, and I poured it into our home church community. I loved those people. But before long I started to struggle with their commitment level. People showed up late. They skipped weeks. They didn't seem as hungry as I thought they should be.

Then God spoke to me, and it wasn't what I expected:

"You know what your problem is? You are an idealist. You are passionate about setting a standard of truth, but you don't always know how to honor someone's process."

That one stung, because it was true.

When zeal meets pride

Idealism is dangerous precisely because it looks so good. It usually grows out of sincere zeal for God. As Rick Joyner has written, it's hard for the devil to stop people who are pursuing the truth, so he often gets behind them and pushes them too far.

Idealism is the tendency to take things beyond what the Lord has directed. Remember Eve adding "or even touch it" to God's command (Day 15). Remember the older brother who could only see his own faithfulness (Day 12). The Pharisees were the most zealous people of their day, and they became the greatest enemies of the Word made flesh.

The problem is never zeal itself. Most of us could use a lot more of it. The problem is zeal mixed with pride. That

combination produces a critical spirit that masquerades as discernment.

Discernment or criticism?

Here's how I've learned to tell the difference in myself:

- **Discernment** sees what's wrong and prays. **Criticism** sees what's wrong and talks.
- **Discernment** remembers my own process. **Criticism** forgets where I came from.
- **Discernment** wants the person restored. **Criticism** wants to be proven right.
- **Discernment** is willing to walk with someone. **Criticism** stands at a distance and grades them.

Paul put it simply: "While knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church" (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Honoring someone's process

Think back over the first four weeks of this book. Every one of us is somewhere in our seasons. God didn't deal with me all at once. He was patient through my refinement, my years of hiding, and my slow learning to know the Holy Spirit. If He honored my process, who am I to demand that everyone else skip theirs?

This doesn't mean lowering the standard. Truth is still truth. But reformation that forgets mercy will never reform anything. It just produces a new kind of Pharisee.

Micah 6:8 holds both together: do what is right, *and* love mercy, *and* walk humbly. All three, all the time.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** A critical spirit can masquerade as discernment.
- **Verse to remember:** "While knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church." 1 Corinthians 8:1
- **Question to consider:** Whose process have I been impatient with lately, and how did God honor mine?
- **Season check:** When I see what's wrong in someone else, is my first move to pray or to talk?

Day 23 · Reformers and Retainers

"When the king heard what was written in the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes in despair." (2 Kings 22:11)

Josiah became king of Judah at eight years old, in a nation that had drifted far from God. Idols filled the land. The temple was in disrepair. And somewhere in that neglected house, the Book of the Law had been lost.

When workers repairing the temple found it and read it to the young king, Josiah tore his clothes. He realized how far his people had wandered from what God had actually said. Then he went to work: he read the Book aloud to the whole nation, renewed the covenant, tore down the idols and restored true worship (2 Kings 23).

That is reformation. Not inventing something new, but returning to what God said in the first place.

The fire and the fireplace

Last week we talked about revival. Here's how revival and reformation relate: **Revival is the fire. Reformation builds the fireplace.**

A fire without a fireplace burns hot and then either goes out or burns the house down. Revival is a moment. Reformation is a process that rebuilds our lives and churches on God's Word so the fire can keep burning for generations.

That's also why so many people want the baby called revival but reject the labor of refinement and repentance. As Jake Hamilton put it, "Everybody wants a resurrection, but no one wants to die."

The church in a chrysalis

A caterpillar doesn't become a butterfly by trying harder. It hangs upside down in a chrysalis, and what looks like death becomes transformation.

I believe the church has been in a chrysalis season. God is resetting the way we do church and family. Some of what's dying needs to die. And what's really us, the people of God, will live on with wings.

Two kinds of builders

God uses two kinds of people to build that fireplace.

Reformers confront drift and restore God's original intent. They challenge, point the way, dismantle compromises and provoke change, sometimes disruptive change. They call people to the cost of discipleship and to live for a generation they won't see.

Retainers preserve what earlier reformation achieved. They maintain sound doctrine, protect healthy culture and keep the church from slowly surrendering to the world around it. They're often cultivators of mercy and grace.

Reformers advance the front lines. Retainers hold them.

Without reformers, the church stagnates. Without retainers, it relapses.

The trouble begins when they don't value each other. Reformers accuse retainers of being stagnant. Retainers accuse reformers of being too intense. Both are wrong, because the Kingdom needs both.

If you're a reformer, honor the people who guard what you're building on. If you're a retainer, listen when a reformer sounds the alarm. Josiah needed the priests who kept the temple standing *and* the courage to tear down the idols.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Revival is the fire; reformation builds the fireplace.
- **Verse to remember:** "When the king heard what was written in the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes in despair." 2 Kings 22:11
- **Question to consider:** Am I more naturally a reformer or a retainer? How do I tend to see the other?
- **Season check:** Is there anything in my life or church where God's Word has been "lost in the temple"? What would it look like to read it again with fresh eyes?

Day 24 • Watchmen, Not "Preyers"

"But if the watchman sees the enemy coming and doesn't sound the alarm to warn the people... I will hold the watchman responsible." (Ezekiel 33:6)

One morning I sensed the Lord ask me a simple question:
Where are the watchmen?

In ancient cities, a watchman stood on the wall and looked for danger. If he saw an enemy coming, his job was to sound the alarm. If people heard it and ignored it, that was on them. But if the watchman saw the enemy and stayed quiet, God held *him* responsible.

"Preyers" instead of watchmen

A friend of mine uses the phrase "mental gymnastics" to describe the way we refuse to see clear compromise in our own camp. We explain it away. We call it someone else's business. We tell ourselves that speaking up would be unloving.

That kind of logical laziness has produced a culture of what I call "preyers" instead of watchmen. Not *prayers*. *Preyers*: people who look away while the enemy preys on God's people right in the middle of the church.

My coach used to say, **"If you're allowing it, you're coaching it."**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who stood against evil in his own generation at the cost of his life, put it this way: "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."

"For the time has come for judgment, and it must begin with God's household" (1 Peter 4:17).

Mercy is not enabling

Much of today's church culture has confused mercy with enabling. We think being merciful means never confronting anyone, so we quietly make room for sin and call it grace.

But biblical mercy always comes with practical expectations and healthy boundaries. A father who never corrects his child isn't merciful; he's absent. "For the LORD corrects those he loves, just as a father corrects a child in whom he delights" (Proverbs 3:12).

Accountability, not accusation

Now, here is where watchmen have to be careful, because Day 22 still applies. A watchman is not the same as a critic.

- **Accusation** wants to expose. **Accountability** wants to restore.
- **Accusation** talks *about* people. **Accountability** talks *to* them, privately first (Matthew 18:15).
- **Accusation** comes from the enemy, "the accuser of our brothers." **Accountability** comes from love.

A true watchman sounds the alarm because he loves the city, not because he enjoys the noise.

True and false unity

Some people avoid sounding the alarm for the sake of unity. But not all unity is holy.

False unity says, "Let's agree to keep the peace," even when truth is being violated. It silences conviction for the sake of comfort. It looks loving, but it leads to lukewarmness. God rebuked the leaders of Jeremiah's day for this: "They offer superficial treatments for my people's mortal wound. They

give assurances of peace when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14).

True unity is forged in the fire of truth, not the fog of tolerance. The early church was united not because they blended in, but because they were set apart together.

There's a difference between *keeping* the peace and *making* peace. Keeping the peace avoids conflict. Making peace walks through it, with truth and love, until something is actually healed.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** If I'm allowing it, I'm coaching it.
- **Verse to remember:** "For the LORD corrects those he loves, just as a father corrects a child in whom he delights." Proverbs 3:12
- **Question to consider:** Where am I keeping the peace instead of making peace?
- **Season check:** Is there an alarm God has asked me to sound, in love, that I've been avoiding? Who do I need to talk *to* instead of *about*?

Day 25 • Honor Without Blind Loyalty

"But Peter and the apostles replied, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority.'" (Acts 5:29)

A good friend called me one day, frustrated with his Bible reading. "How can David be called a man after God's own heart," he asked, "when he killed Uriah to cover up an affair with his wife?"

I didn't have a quick answer. As I meditated on it, I heard the Lord say something that startled me: *"Loyalty will get you killed."*

Uriah's loyalty

So I went back to the story. Uriah was one of David's mighty men, fiercely loyal. When David called him home from battle, hoping he'd sleep with his wife and cover David's sin, Uriah refused. His fellow soldiers were in tents; how could he enjoy his home? (2 Samuel 11:11).

Then David wrote a letter to his general telling him to put Uriah on the front lines and pull back so he'd be killed. And he gave that letter to Uriah to deliver (2 Samuel 11:14-15). Uriah carried his own death sentence, faithfully, to the very end, because he was loyal to a king who had stopped being worthy of it.

David's honor

Now look at David years earlier, under King Saul. Saul was God's anointed, but he had become jealous and dangerous. One night Saul threw a spear to pin David to the wall. David dodged it, and that same night he escaped through a window (1 Samuel 19:10-12).

David never stopped *honoring* Saul. Later, when he had the chance to kill him, he refused: "I shouldn't attack the

LORD's anointed one" (1 Samuel 24:6). But David also didn't stay in the room while Saul kept throwing spears. He honored Saul without giving him blind loyalty.

Here is the principle: **People deserve our honor. Only God deserves our loyalty.**

Why reformers need this

Every reformation in history required this distinction. Martin Luther couldn't ask the church authorities of his day for permission to start the Reformation. The apostles couldn't ask the council for permission to keep preaching Jesus. They honored authority, but when man's word and God's Word collided, they said, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

Paul said it this way: "Obviously, I'm not trying to win the approval of people, but of God. If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ's servant" (Galatians 1:10).

This is not permission to be rebellious. Remember Day 22: reformers who forget mercy become Pharisees. Honor means you speak respectfully, go privately first and refuse to slander. But honor never requires you to carry the letter that kills you, or to help a leader hide what God wants exposed.

What kind of house?

Reformation always asks, *What is the church supposed to be?* I've seen four common answers:

Mentality	Church becomes	The danger
American Idol	A competition where charisma and talent rule	Personality over doctrine; selfish ambition over discipleship
University	An intellectual club for the credentialed	Pride; faith as theory and head knowledge

Mentality	Church becomes	The danger
Movie theater	Entertainment for passive consumers	Fans instead of faithfulness; low commitment
Family	A household of belonging and sacrificial love	(This is the biblical model)

Only the last one matches Acts 2. In a family, you honor your elders, you speak the truth in love, and your loyalty belongs to the Father. That's the kind of house God is rebuilding: a house of prayer, and a family.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** People deserve our honor; only God deserves our loyalty.
- **Verse to remember:** "We must obey God rather than any human authority." Acts 5:29
- **Question to consider:** Is there a person or institution I've given the loyalty that belongs only to God?
- **Season check:** Which of the four church mentalities have I brought into my own faith? What would it look like to live as family?

For Small Groups • Week 5 • Reformation

Meet once after Day 25. This week can stir strong opinions about churches and leaders. Keep the focus on your own hearts and your own community, and don't name or criticize people who aren't in the room.

1. **Open:** Read Matthew 21:13 aloud. Ask: what would it look like for our group to be a house of prayer, not a marketplace?
2. **Day 21:** Do you tend to come to church as a consumer or a contributor? What "helmet" have you been leaving on the sideline?
3. **Day 22:** Where do you see idealism, zeal mixed with pride, in yourself? Whose process do you need to honor?
4. **Day 23:** Are you more naturally a reformer or a retainer? What do you appreciate about the other kind?
5. **Day 24:** Where are you keeping the peace instead of making peace?
6. **Day 25:** What does it look like to honor a leader without giving them blind loyalty?

Practice together: Plan your next meeting so that everyone brings something: a song, a Scripture, a short testimony, a prayer, or a word of encouragement (1 Corinthians 14:26). Then do it.

Pray: As a group, pray for the leaders of your church by name: for their protection, their purity and their courage to follow God's Word.

Week 6 • Recalculate

Day 26 • Training for the Wrong Test

"You like to appear righteous in public, but God knows your hearts. What this world honors is detestable in the sight of God." (Luke 16:15)

When I was preparing for NFL training camp, I trained for the conditioning test by running on a treadmill.

It felt like preparation. I was sweating. I was putting in the time. The numbers on the screen told me I was getting in shape. I had every good intention of showing up ready.

There was just one problem. The test wasn't on a treadmill.

The actual test

The real test was three 300-yard shuttles, running 50 yards down and back, on grass. Each one had to be finished in under 60 seconds.

A treadmill moves the ground for you. It never asks you to stop, plant, turn and explode back the other way. It doesn't have grass, wind or fatigue that builds every time you change direction. I had been practicing a more comfortable version of the test.

The wake-up call

Five days before the test, I finally practiced under the real conditions.

I missed the 60-second goal by six, eight and ten seconds.

All those hours, and I wasn't even close. My intentions had been good. My effort had been real. But I had been training for the wrong test.

Recalculating

That changed everything.

The next day, I committed to training for the test as it would actually be given. Grass. Cones. Fifty yards down and back, again and again, until my body learned what the real thing demanded.

By test day, I passed with flying colors.

I didn't need more effort. I needed a different route. That's what it means to recalculate: you stop, admit the road you're on won't get you where you need to go, and turn around while there's still time.

The island of isolation

Looking back, the treadmill wasn't my only mistake. I trained alone, on an island, with my own plan. And I trained in the comfort and convenience of an air-conditioned house.

The island of isolation is pride masked with good intentions. It tells you, "I've got this. I don't need anyone checking my work." It feels like discipline. Often it's self-reliance wearing a uniform.

The Bible says, "Without wise leadership, a nation falls; there is safety in having many advisers" (Proverbs 11:14). And again, "Plans go wrong for lack of advice; many advisers bring success" (Proverbs 15:22).

When we skip the crucible called community, or reject wise counsel, we don't just miss information. We drift into the wilderness of disobedience, and we end up needing to recalculate. The people around us are often the ones who can see that we're running on a treadmill when the test is on grass.

A parable of almost right

The lesson is simple: you cannot prepare for the real test by practicing a more comfortable version of it.

The same is true spiritually. When we reshape church and discipleship into a "have it your way" experience, we may feel prepared. But we are training for the wrong test.

I call it Netflix Christianity. It's faith on demand, consumed alone from the comfort of the couch. You choose what you want to watch, skip what makes you uncomfortable, and never have to leave the air conditioning. It feels like engagement, but it's a treadmill in the living room, and the real test is still on grass.

That's the danger of almost right. A treadmill is almost right. It's real running and real sweat. But almost right is still wrong when the test is given on grass.

Jesus warned about this twice. In Luke 16:15, He warned against valuing what people esteem. In Mark 7:13, He warned against those who "cancel the word of God in order to hand down your own tradition."

Comfort. Approval. Tradition. When we choose these over obedience to God's Word, our preparation becomes an illusion.

Prepare for the real test

If we are going to endure the pain, pressure, deception and persecution of the last days, we must stop practicing a comfortable version of Christianity.

The good news is that it isn't too late. I had five days. You have today. That is what this week is about: letting God show you where you've been training for the wrong test, and having the courage to recalculate.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** I cannot prepare for the real test by practicing a more comfortable version of it.
- **Verse to remember:** "What this world honors is detestable in the sight of God." Luke 16:15
- **Question to consider:** Where has comfort, approval or tradition become my treadmill?
- **Season check:** If my faith were tested under real conditions this week, by what margin would I miss? What would it look like to start training on grass?



Day 27 • Eleven Days or Forty Years

*"Normally it takes only eleven days to travel from Mount Sinai to Kadesh-barnea, going by way of Mount Seir. But forty years after the Israelites left Egypt... Moses addressed the people of Israel."
(Deuteronomy 1:2-3)*

Read that verse again. Eleven days. That's how long the trip should have taken. It took Israel forty years.

It wasn't the distance that delayed them. It was the path they chose.

That's the heart of the season of Recalculate. Like a GPS that keeps saying "recalculating" every time you miss a turn, God doesn't abandon us when we choose our own way. He reroutes us. But the reroute can turn an eleven-day trip into a forty-year one.

One wilderness, two perspectives

When Israel reached the edge of the promised land, Moses sent twelve scouts to explore it. All twelve saw the same land. All twelve came back with the same facts: the land was good, flowing with milk and honey, and the people living there were strong.

But they came back with two different reports.

Ten of them said, "We can't go up against them! They are stronger than we are!... Next to them we felt like grasshoppers, and that's what they thought, too!" (Numbers 13:31, 33).

Two of them, Joshua and Caleb, looked at the same giants and said, in effect, *Our God is bigger*.

The people believed the ten. And that one decision turned eleven days into forty years.

Your wilderness experience isn't decided by your circumstances. It's decided by the posture of your heart toward God in them.

Lowering our theology

Here's a sentence I've had to learn the hard way: **When the present doesn't match the promise, we will be tempted to lower our theology to match our pain.**

That's what the ten scouts did. God had promised the land. But the giants were real and the walls were high, so they quietly decided God's promise must not mean what it said.

We do the same thing. A prayer goes unanswered, and we decide God doesn't really answer prayer. A promise is delayed, and we decide it was never really a promise. Instead of letting our faith rise to meet God's Word, we lower God's Word to meet our disappointment.

Missing Egypt

The saddest part is what Israel said next: "Wouldn't it be better for us to return to Egypt?" (Numbers 14:3)

Truth be told, many of us miss "the days of Egypt" too. We remember the leeks and onions and forget the whips and bricks. When we mislabel the wilderness as rejection, we start believing the lie that the enemy treated us better than God does.

But the pain of trusting God's promises will never outweigh the pain of being a slave in Egypt.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** It wasn't the distance that delayed them; it was the path they chose.
- **Verse to remember:** "Normally it takes only eleven days to travel from Mount Sinai to Kadesh-barnea." Deuteronomy 1:2
- **Question to consider:** Where have I lowered my theology to match my pain?
- **Season check:** Looking at the giants in my life right now, am I bringing back the report of the ten or of Joshua and Caleb?

Day 28 • Five Wildernesses

*"Remember how the LORD your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands."
(Deuteronomy 8:2)*

We tend to think every wilderness means the same thing: *I did something wrong, and God is punishing me.* But Scripture shows us that people end up in the wilderness for very different reasons.

That matters, because **what you mislabel, you will mistreat.** The devil tempted Adam and Eve, Jesus and Israel in the same way: by trying to change what they believed they were seeing. If he can mislabel your wilderness, he can change your desires. What you mislabel, you'll mistreat. What you mistreat will mislead you. And once you're misled, the enemy can misuse you.

So let's name them. Here are five wildernesses God uses to shape His people:

Wilderness	How you get there	What God is doing
Disobedience	Your own choices	Disciplining you to win you back
Obedience	Following the Spirit's lead	Testing and protecting you
Divine training	His invitation to grow	Strengthening you for what's ahead
Half obedience	Doing part of what He said	Exposing what you're holding back
Servanthood	Others' choices you carry	Making you a father or mother to others

The wilderness of disobedience

This is the self-inflicted wilderness. I've been in it. In my first year of college, I got offended with God over the success of some of my teammates. I let that offense lead me into disobedience, and I learned the hard way the value and protection of His Word.

But even here, God's goal isn't punishment. It's restoration. "I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her there. I will return her vineyards to her and transform the Valley of Trouble into a gateway of hope" (Hosea 2:14-15).

The wilderness of obedience

Sometimes you end up in the wilderness *because* you obeyed. Jesus, "full of the Holy Spirit," was "led by the Spirit in the wilderness" (Luke 4:1). David spent years hiding in the wilderness, but "Saul hunted him day after day, but God didn't let Saul find him" (1 Samuel 23:14).

We often think of the wilderness as a place of rejection. Often it's a place of protection.

The wilderness of divine training

This wilderness is about becoming the person you were created to be. "My suffering was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees" (Psalm 119:71). Any athlete knows that training is as much about injury prevention as it is about strength. God trains us in hidden places so we don't break in public ones.

The wilderness of half obedience

Jesus told about a father who asked two sons to work in the vineyard. One said no but went. The other said, "Yes, sir, I will," and never went (Matthew 21:28-31).

Half obedience feels like obedience, but it isn't. As Rick Joyner observed, the problem with a living sacrifice is that it can get off the altar whenever it wants. Partial, delayed or surface obedience can keep us circling the same mountain for years.

The wilderness of servanthood

Some people walk through the wilderness not because of their own choices but because they're carrying others. Moses obeyed God, yet he spent forty years in the wilderness with a stubborn people, and even pleaded with God to spare them (Exodus 32:11-14). That's the wilderness of fathers and mothers. We'll come back to it in the season of Repeat.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** What I mislabel, I will mistreat.
- **Verse to remember:** "I will... transform the Valley of Trouble into a gateway of hope." Hosea 2:15
- **Question to consider:** Which of the five wildernesses have I walked through? Which one am I in now?
- **Season check:** Have I been calling a wilderness of protection or training a wilderness of rejection?

Day 29 • When God Destroys Our Plans

"So the Israelites examined their food, but they did not consult the LORD." (Joshua 9:14)

After Jericho fell, Israel was on a winning streak. Then a group of travelers showed up at their camp with worn-out sandals, patched wineskins and dry, moldy bread. "We have come from a distant land," they said. "Make a treaty with us."

It looked like an opportunity. Maybe even a reward. So Israel's leaders checked the evidence. They looked at the bread. They examined the wineskins. Everything seemed to add up.

But they didn't ask God.

Three days later they found out the travelers were Gibeonites, neighbors from just down the road, the very people God had told them not to make treaties with. And because Israel had sworn an oath, they were stuck with the deal for generations.

Recalculate in disguise

Some of the most dangerous moments in our lives don't look like temptation. They look like opportunity. A job that pays more but pulls you away from what God told you to do. A relationship that feels like an answer to prayer but that no one wise has been allowed to weigh in on. A shortcut that seems like favor.

Those are Gibeonites: opportunities that look like reward but are really a recalculation waiting to happen.

Notice what Israel did wrong. They weren't lazy. They did their homework. They just relied on their own judgment

instead of seeking God and wise counsel. Remember the island of isolation from Day 26? The Gibeonites still find people on that island.

"An inheritance obtained too early in life is not a blessing in the end" (Proverbs 20:21).

A parable: Noah's recalculation

Let me tell you a story. This isn't in the Bible. It's a parable, an imagined "what if" to help us see ourselves.

Imagine that Noah, the righteous man God chose to build the ark, began with wholehearted obedience. Every swing of the hammer was worship. But as the years went on, he got distracted. The bustling commerce of the city, the allure of wealth and the admiration of others started to pull at him. He began to dream of building a business that would rival any in the region, and the ark slowly took a back seat.

So God, in love, began to disrupt Noah's plans. Materials went missing. Workers were called away. Storms delayed construction. Every setback was a firm, gentle nudge back toward the mission.

Frustrated, Noah finally went to prayer, and remembered a truth he'd forgotten: **Sometimes God will destroy our plans when He sees that our plans are going to destroy us.**

Noah recommitted himself to the ark. And when the rain came, the only thing that mattered was whether the ark was finished.

Thank God for the detour

Jesus said, "When the Son of Man returns, it will be like it was in Noah's day" (Matthew 24:37). People will be busy

eating, drinking, marrying and building businesses, right up until the flood.

If God has been interrupting your plans lately, don't assume He's against you. He may be protecting you from a Gibeonite you didn't see, or calling you back to an ark you stopped building. The detour is mercy, not rejection.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Sometimes God will destroy my plans when He sees that my plans are going to destroy me.
- **Verse to remember:** "So the Israelites examined their food, but they did not consult the LORD." Joshua 9:14
- **Question to consider:** What "Gibeonite" opportunity did I agree to without asking God?
- **Season check:** Before my next major decision, who are two wise people I will ask, and how long will I wait on God first?

Day 30 • Worship in the Wilderness

"Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening." (Acts 16:25)

Paul and Silas had done nothing wrong. They had set a young woman free from a demonic spirit, and for that they were stripped, beaten with rods and thrown into the inner dungeon with their feet clamped in stocks.

And at midnight, they started singing.

Then came the earthquake, the open doors, the falling chains, and a terrified jailer asking, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" By morning, his whole household believed.

But here's what I want you to notice. Paul and Silas didn't sing *in order to* get the earthquake. They didn't know an earthquake was coming. They sang because God was worth singing to, even in the dark.

We don't worship in the wilderness for results. We worship in the wilderness because He is the reward.

Worry or worship

Every wilderness gives you two choices. You can be consumed by your problems in the wilderness, or you can worship the God of Scripture in the wilderness.

Israel chose worry. "Oh, how often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved his heart in that dry wasteland" (Psalm 78:40). When we worry in the wilderness instead of worshiping in it, we open the door to disbelief, compromise and disobedience.

What you focus on, you will worship. If you focus on your pain, you will end up worshiping your problems, and it will come out as complaining or giving in to compromise.

Even Elijah

If you're tired, you're in good company. Right after one of the greatest victories in the Bible, Elijah ran into the wilderness, sat under a broom tree and asked God to take his life.

God didn't lecture him. He sent an angel with bread and water and said, "Get up and eat some more, or the journey ahead will be too much for you" (1 Kings 19:7). Sometimes worship in the wilderness looks like a nap and a meal, and letting God take care of you.

But God didn't leave Elijah in the cave either. Sometimes we're actually fighting giants in the promised land, but the warfare is so intense it *feels* like a wilderness, so we retreat to a cave that matches our feelings instead of our reality.

Coming up out of the wilderness

Here is the promise of this season. Jesus went into the wilderness full of the Spirit. And He came out of it "filled with the Holy Spirit's power" (Luke 4:14). He went in full and came out powerful.

There's a reason for this season. God never wastes your pain. "For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland" (Isaiah 43:19).

You don't have to wait for the earthquake to start singing. Start now, at midnight, in the dark. The doors may open or they may not, but either way, you'll have the One who was always the reward.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** We don't worship in the wilderness for results; we worship because He is the reward.
- **Verse to remember:** "I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland." Isaiah 43:19
- **Question to consider:** In my current season, am I worrying in the wilderness or worshiping in it?
- **Season check:** Is there a "cave" I've retreated into that matches my feelings more than my spiritual reality? What's one step out of it?

For Small Groups • Week 6 • Recalculate

Meet once after Day 30. This is a week for honesty about detours. Make it safe to admit mistakes without shame, because recalculating is an act of grace.

1. **Open:** Read Deuteronomy 1:2 aloud. Ask: what's one "eleven-day trip" in your life that turned into something much longer?
2. **Day 26:** Where have you been training on a treadmill instead of on grass? Where have you isolated yourself from wise counsel?
3. **Day 27:** When the present didn't match the promise, how were you tempted to lower your theology?
4. **Day 28:** Which of the five wildernesses have you walked through? Have you ever mislabeled one?
5. **Day 29:** Share a "Gibeonite" decision you made without asking God, or a time God disrupted your plans to protect you.
6. **Day 30:** What does worship in the wilderness look like for you right now?

Practice together: Before your next major decision, ask two people in this group for counsel and agree to wait on God before acting. Name the decision out loud now if you're comfortable.

Pray: End by singing or reading a psalm of worship together, like Paul and Silas at midnight. Then pray for anyone in the group who is in a wilderness season right now.

Week 7 • Revolution

Day 31 • Why Did God Make You This Way?

"For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago." (Ephesians 2:10)

I was drafted into the NFL convinced I had finally arrived. It wasn't what I thought it would be. The lights were bright, but the joy felt thin. Disappointment settled in, and quitting crossed my mind more than once.

Part of the ache went deeper than football. I felt a pull toward ministry, and the NFL felt like the wrong place to be.

One question

One night I was venting to the mom of a longtime friend. I confessed the tension I felt: "I'm supposed to be in ministry, but I'm stuck in the NFL." Football wasn't enough.

She listened quietly. Then she asked a simple question that stopped me cold:

"Why do you think God created you with the gifts, size, and talent you have?"

Not a drift

That question anchored me in a possibility I had never considered. I had not drifted into the NFL out of ignorance, complacency or compromise. This was always part of God's divine will.

Without realizing it, I had been treating my career as a detour. Somewhere along the way I had believed that real ministry happened in a pulpit, and everything else was a

waiting room. Her question exposed the lie underneath: that God's will only lives inside church buildings.

The size, the strength and the ability weren't accidents. Before I ever stepped onto a field, God had prepared the field.

That question didn't remove the pain, but it gave the pain a purpose. It became the fuel I needed to endure the next season: the refinement, the pressure and the unseen work. What felt like delay was actually preparation.

Daniel in Babylon

Daniel didn't drift into Babylon either. He was carried there as a young man, trained in a foreign culture and placed in a pagan king's court. By every outward sign, he was in the wrong place.

But "Daniel was determined not to defile himself" (Daniel 1:8), and God used him to speak truth to kings for the rest of his life. Babylon wasn't Daniel's failure. It was his assignment.

Revolution

In the world, a revolution is a rapid and forceful overthrow of a government or established order. In the Kingdom of God, revolution is a costly resistance shaped by living for eternity. It begins when believers reorder their lives around God's long-term purposes.

Many believers think revolution means leaving their world to go do something spiritual. Sometimes it means staying where God planted you and refusing to live there like everyone else does.

The locker room, the office, the classroom, the hospital, the studio, the home: every sphere of life is a mountain where

God wants His people present. That isn't about politics or power. It's about presence.

That is what this week is about. The question my friend's mom asked me is the question I'm asking you: Why do you think God created you the way He did?

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** I didn't drift into my life by accident; God prepared the field before I stepped onto it.
- **Verse to remember:** "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago." Ephesians 2:10
- **Question to consider:** Why do I think God created me the way He did?
- **Season check:** Where have I been treating my everyday work as a waiting room instead of an assignment?

Day 32 • The Seven Mountains

"The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it." (Genesis 2:15)

In my fifth year in the NFL, God brought a new mentor into my life. With him came a revelation that quietly rewired everything.

He introduced me to the idea of the seven mountains. Culture, he explained, is shaped through seven primary realms of influence:

1. Family
2. Religion
3. Education
4. Government
5. Media
6. Arts and entertainment
7. Business

These aren't secular spaces for Christians to avoid, he said. They're mission fields God intends to redeem. But somewhere along the way, the church had retreated from six of those mountains and reduced "ministry" to what happens inside church walls.

That hit me hard, in the best way.

Not competing, but context

On Day 31 I told you how a friend's mom asked me why God had made me the way He did. This was the next step. I realized I wasn't in the NFL by accident, luck or talent alone. I was there by divine design, placed on one of those mountains on purpose.

Football wasn't competing with my faith. It was the context God had chosen for my obedience.

That freed me. I stopped fearing that success would turn the NFL into an idol, and I started embracing a spirit of excellence. Not striving for significance, but stewarding influence. I learned that worship isn't just what you sing. It's how you show up, lead and serve wherever God places you.

The field didn't need to be my idol. It became my divine assignment.

Work was always worship

Before sin ever entered the world, God gave Adam a job: "to tend and watch over" the garden. Work isn't a result of the curse. It was part of the original design. "Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people" (Colossians 3:23).

That means a nurse's shift, a teacher's lesson plan, a mechanic's repair and a mother's long day can all be acts of worship. A kingdom activist doesn't see their daily routine as a checklist. They see it as an assignment, knowing that because the Holy Spirit lives in them, any moment can become the moment someone encounters the living God.

Turning the world upside down

When Paul and Silas came to Thessalonica, their enemies shouted, "Paul and Silas have caused trouble all over the world, and now they are here disturbing our city, too" (Acts 17:6). They weren't running a program. They were simply living and preaching the Kingdom in the middle of the city.

Have you ever been accused of that at your job, your school, your gym, or even your church?

Remember, this is not about politics or power. It's about presence. You can't change the world if you haven't been changed by His presence. And you'll never change a world you refuse to engage.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** My work isn't competing with my faith; it's the context God chose for my obedience.
- **Verse to remember:** "Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people." Colossians 3:23
- **Question to consider:** Which of the seven mountains has God placed me on?
- **Season check:** What is one act of excellence I can offer on my mountain this week, as worship?

Day 33 • Consecrated, Not Isolated

"Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent." (Luke 5:31–32)

A young man sat across from his pastor, frustrated. "I keep falling into the same cycle of sin," he admitted. "I try harder, but I fail again."

The pastor asked, "Why don't professional athletes get to use steroids?"

"Because it gives them an unfair advantage. They'd be disqualified."

"Exactly," the pastor said. "But in the Kingdom of God, the Lord *wants* you to live with an unfair advantage. He didn't leave you to fight sin with willpower alone. He put the Holy Spirit inside you, with a new heart and the mind of Christ. In sports, you're disqualified for using a performance enhancer. In the Kingdom, you lose out when you refuse to use the advantage God already gave you."

The battle wasn't about trying harder. It was about yielding to the power already living in him.

Three things that look alike

That unfair advantage is what makes it possible to live on a mountain without becoming like it. But many believers confuse three things that look alike from a distance:

	What it is	Where it leads
Consecration	Setting yourself apart <i>for</i> intimacy with God	Into the world with His presence
Isolation	Pulling away <i>from</i> the world for comfort and safety	An island where nothing changes

	What it is	Where it leads
Legalism	Turning personal preferences into rules for others	Pride and control

Consecration seeks purity for the sake of intimacy. Isolation seeks preservation for the sake of comfort. If we mislabel the island of isolation as consecration, we drift away from the very world we're called to reach. We can believe we're growing in revelation while producing the same unfruitful results, trapped in our own self-made island.

Jesus didn't pray for us to be taken out of the world. He prayed, "I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one" (John 17:15).

The friend-of-sinners test

Here's a simple way to check yourself.

If your friends in the world describe you as relatable and a breath of fresh air, while some of your Christian friends call you legalistic, it may simply mean they've settled for lukewarm affection toward God. Lukewarm Christians often call consecration legalism because it disrupts their comfort.

But if you consider yourself consecrated, yet no one would ever accuse you of being "a friend of sinners," it may be time for honest self-reflection. The Pharisees were very separate. They just weren't holy.

Inside the cup

Jesus told the Pharisees, "First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too" (Matthew 23:26).

The outside of the cup is what people see: our public service, our posts, our church activity. The inside is what

only God sees: our motives, our private devotion, our marriages and our secret sins. Daniel prayed three times a day in his room long before he was thrown into the lions' den (Daniel 6:10). His public courage grew out of private consecration.

You will recreate in the world the environment you've cultivated in your heart. Start with the inside of the cup.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Consecration and isolation are not the same thing.
- **Verse to remember:** "I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one." John 17:15
- **Question to consider:** Would anyone ever accuse me of being a "friend of sinners"?
- **Season check:** Is there an area where I've called isolation "consecration"? What's on the inside of my cup that only God sees?

Day 34 • Commandment, Conviction or Wisdom?

"You say, 'I am allowed to do anything'—but not everything is good for you... So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (1 Corinthians 10:23, 31)

Asha slammed her water bottle down. "Yoga is idolatry. People who practice it open themselves up to spirits. Christians shouldn't do it."

Ben shrugged. "I do yoga for stretching. It's just a workout to me. I don't think the enemy can copyright a pose."

Their pastor, Ruth, sat down between them. "This is exactly the kind of disagreement Paul wrote about," she said.

What Ruth said next is one of the most useful tools I know for living on the mountains God sends us to.

Three different things

Many conflicts between believers come from confusing three different things:

- **A commandment is a corporate rule.** It's what God has clearly said to everyone, everywhere. "You must not murder." "You must not commit adultery."
- **A conviction is a personal rule.** It's what God has asked of *you*, often for your own protection or calling. "Each person should be fully convinced in their own mind" (see Romans 14:5).
- **Wisdom is corporate guidance.** It's the shared counsel of Scripture and mature believers on gray areas, like how to handle debt, media or friendships.

And here is how the two orphan mindsets twist them: **The religious spirit will take a conviction and try to make it a commandment. The rebellious spirit will take a commandment and try to make it a conviction.**

The religious orphan says, "God told *me* not to do this, so nobody should." The rebellious orphan says, "Well, that commandment is just your conviction. It doesn't apply to me."

What Ruth said

Ruth turned to Asha first. "Paul warns that our freedom can harm someone with a weaker conscience. If Ben's practice would make you stumble, he should hold back out of love. But Paul also says not to quarrel over disputed matters. We don't impose personal convictions as biblical law."

Then she turned to Ben. "Asha sees a real spiritual danger. Love her enough to take her concern seriously."

And then she asked Asha a question I've had to ask myself: *"Have you been accused more of controlling people's process, or of enabling people's sin?"* Our answer usually reveals which way we lean.

Finally she said, "John the Baptist couldn't drink the wine that Jesus made from water. Know who you are called to be, and which mantle you carry. The grace God has given you may differ from the grace He's given the person next to you."

They left still disagreeing, but reconciled. Ben agreed to be considerate. Asha agreed to listen without condemning.

Agreement and acceptance

That's the last lesson: **Agreement and acceptance are not the same thing.** I can accept and love someone I don't

agree with. Love doesn't require seeing everything the same way.

People on the mountains are watching how Christians disagree. Hold the commandments firmly, your convictions humbly, and wisdom together.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** The religious spirit turns convictions into commandments; the rebellious spirit turns commandments into convictions.
- **Verse to remember:** "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." 1 Corinthians 10:31
- **Question to consider:** Which conviction have I treated as a commandment, or which commandment have I treated as a preference?
- **Season check:** Have I been accused more of controlling people's process or enabling people's sin?

Day 35 • Called, Assigned, Anointed

"So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us." (2 Corinthians 5:20)

This week we've seen that God places His people on mountains, keeps them consecrated without isolating them, and teaches them to tell commandments from convictions. Today let's put it together. What exactly has God given you to carry up the mountain?

Three gifts from God

I think of it in three parts:

1. **The call is what God invites you into.** It's the divine purpose placed on your life to glorify Him, often long before anyone else recognizes it. "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago" (Ephesians 2:10).
2. **The assignment is what God entrusts you to steward.** It's the specific mission, responsibility or burden Heaven gives you to carry in a particular season, on a particular mountain. "All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27).
3. **The anointing is what God empowers supernaturally.** It's the grace and spiritual power that let you do what you could never do in your own strength. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you" (Acts 1:8).

God calls. He assigns. He anoints. Our part is to steward and obey.

What sustains all three

Many people want the call, the assignment and the anointing. Few want the character that sustains all three.

The call may open the door. The assignment may place the mantle on your shoulders. The anointing may empower you beyond your natural ability. But without character, what God meant to promote you can end up destroying you.

As John Paul Jackson put it, "The anointing is a gift. Authority is based on a relationship." You can be *entertained* by someone's anointing, but you'll be *transformed* when someone walks in true authority.

Here's how I explain the difference:

- **Spiritual gift + stewarding the gift = anointing.** That's how we gain favor with people.
- **Intimacy + obedience = authority.** That's how we gain favor with God.

Even Jesus "grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people" (Luke 2:52). Both matter. But only one keeps you standing.

Whose ambassador are you?

Paul called us "Christ's ambassadors." In the ancient world, being named an ambassador was one of the highest honors a king could give. With no phones or email, a king might not hear from his ambassador for months, so he chose only his closest friends, people of one mind with him.

Rick Joyner points out that even then, ambassadors were often recalled after a couple of years, because the king knew that over time they would start to sympathize more with the country they were sent *to* than the one they were sent *from*.

God doesn't recall His ambassadors every two years. That's why we have to check our hearts continually. The longer you live on your mountain, the easier it is to start representing its interests instead of your King's.

Consecrated and courageous

Daniel served under multiple pagan kings for decades. He never stopped representing his true King. And "Daniel soon proved himself more capable than all the other administrators and high officers" (Daniel 6:3). The world noticed an excellent spirit in him.

That's the call of Revolution: a people both consecrated and courageous. Not radical Christianity, just normal, biblical Christianity, lived on every mountain where God has placed us.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** The anointing is a gift; authority is based on a relationship.
- **Verse to remember:** "So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us." 2 Corinthians 5:20
- **Question to consider:** What is my call, what is my current assignment, and where have I seen God's anointing on my life?
- **Season check:** After time on my mountain, am I still representing my King's interests, or have I started to sympathize more with the culture I was sent to?

For Small Groups • Week 7 • Revolution

Meet once after Day 35. This week is about the places you spend most of your life: your work, school, home and neighborhood. Help each person see their everyday world as a mission field.

1. **Open:** Read Ephesians 2:10 aloud. Ask each person: why do you think God created you the way He did?
2. **Day 31:** Have you ever felt "stuck" somewhere you thought wasn't spiritual? What changes if it was always part of God's plan?
3. **Day 32:** Which of the seven mountains has God placed you on?
4. **Day 33:** Would anyone mistake you for a "friend of sinners"? Where might you be calling isolation "consecration"?
5. **Day 34:** Which conviction have you treated as a commandment, or which commandment as a preference?
6. **Day 35:** What is your call, and what is your current assignment?

Practice together: Go around the circle and name your mountain and one act of excellence you'll offer there this week. Check in with each other next time.

Pray: Lay hands on each person and pray for them as an ambassador on their mountain: for favor, courage, an excellent spirit, and a heart that stays loyal to the King.

Week 8 • Release

Day 36 • The Tree That Split Down the Middle

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding." (Proverbs 3:5)

I came outside one day and saw that the big tree in front of our house had split down the middle.

The Lord spoke to me in that moment: *Pay attention, and learn from this.*

When I talked to our landscaper, he told me the tree had been diseased and dying on the inside. You would have had to look very closely to know it. From the outside, its leaves were green, and it appeared healthy.

I couldn't stop thinking about it. That tree preached me a sermon in three points.

It looked good, but it was dying inside

The tree didn't fall because of a storm. The weight of its own branches and leaves split it down the middle. The disease wasn't visible at first, but it was fatal.

That's the danger of looking successful. When everything on the outside is green, it's hard to admit something is rotting on the inside. And it's hard to seek help when people assume you don't need any.

"For as he thinks in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7, NKJV). What's happening inside eventually decides what happens outside.

Help was available, but no one asked

The tree could have been spared. If we had seen the disease spreading, an arborist could have pruned the branches and given it special treatment.

We need the same thing. We need trusted prophetic voices in our lives who can diagnose our spiritual condition before it splits us in two. Spiritual health requires spiritual discernment, and few of us can see our own disease clearly. That means trusting God's diagnosis, not just appearances.

To live, it had to be stripped

Here is the hardest part. For the tree to survive, it would have needed to be totally stripped and left barren for a season.

No leaves. No shade. Nothing for the neighbors to admire.

For us, that season is dying to the need to always look successful in the eyes of man. It's letting God cut away what everyone else can see so He can heal what no one else can.

Trees know the seasons

Trees often know the seasons and the timing of pruning better than people do. They know when to be planted, and they don't rush the process. They know when to bear fruit. They know when to allow pruning, submitting to the cut so they can grow stronger and bear even more. And they stop feeding what must die so new life can grow.

People, on the other hand, often cling to dead things. We resist the very pruning that produces health, fruit and purpose.

Jesus said it this way:

"I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that

doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me." (John 15:1-4)

What release really means

That is what the season of Release is about. It's not losing what you love. It's letting go of what is slowly killing you, even when it still looks green.

Real health is found in humility, surrender and truth. Not just success, but significance.

So here is the question the tree left me with, and I'll leave it with you: What are you still feeding that God is asking you to release?

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Looking healthy and being healthy are not the same thing.
- **Verse to remember:** "He prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more." John 15:2
- **Question to consider:** Who in my life has permission to diagnose what's happening on the inside?
- **Season check:** What am I still feeding that God is asking me to release, and what am I afraid people will think if my branches look bare for a season?

Day 37 • How Long Will You Mourn for Saul?

"Now the LORD said to Samuel, 'You have mourned long enough for Saul. I have rejected him as king of Israel, so fill your flask with olive oil and go to Bethlehem. Find a man named Jesse who lives there, for I have selected one of his sons to be my king.'" (1 Samuel 16:1)

Samuel loved Saul. He had anointed him as Israel's first king. He had prayed for him, corrected him and believed in him.

But Saul kept choosing his own way. After one final act of disobedience, God rejected him as king. And then the Bible says something heartbreaking: "Samuel never went to meet with Saul again, but he mourned constantly for him" (1 Samuel 15:35).

Samuel did the right thing. He set the boundary. But he couldn't stop grieving.

So God asked him a question. Many translations put it this way: *"How long will you mourn for Saul?"* Then God told him to fill his horn with oil and go anoint the next king.

Necessary endings

The word *boundaries* can sound like a modern psychology term. But this principle runs all through Scripture. Samuel loved Saul, yet Saul's ongoing disobedience made a necessary ending inevitable.

That's the season of Release. Repentance acknowledges that we have fallen short and turns back to God. Release acknowledges that God's season with a person, a role or a

thing has ended, and asks us to exchange the familiar for faith.

Dr. Henry Cloud writes, "Getting to the next level always requires ending something, leaving it behind, and moving on. Growth itself demands that we move on."

Remember Day 3? Seasons aren't errors. When the days get shorter, a farmer doesn't panic. He knows it's time to end one season's work and start the next.

Grieving what you thought it was

Release is hard because grief is real. Author Nedra Glover Tawwab puts it this way: "You're grieving for who you thought they were, or in some cases who they pretended to be. It's okay to see the truth about who someone really is but still miss the person you thought you knew."

There is "a time to grieve and a time to dance" (Ecclesiastes 3:4). God isn't asking you not to grieve. He's asking you not to stay there.

Saul or David

Here's the hard truth: **It's hard to anoint the David in your life if you're too distracted mourning over your Saul.**

We often miss what God is doing next because we're still holding on to something that gives us comfort and familiarity. Some of the "Sauls" we cling to:

- **Unhealthy relationships** kept out of loyalty or comfort
- **Stale careers** held for identity rather than calling
- **Ministry partnerships** that compromise the mission
- **Old wineskins:** ways of thinking about God that no longer fit what He's doing

- **Traditions of men** held above Scripture and the Spirit
- **Leaders we've idolized**, so that loyalty to a person blocks obedience to God
- **Family patterns** that keep us bound to unhealthy roles

God still says to us what He said to Samuel: *Fill your horn with oil and go.*

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** It's hard to anoint the David in my life if I'm still mourning my Saul.
- **Verse to remember:** "You have mourned long enough for Saul... fill your flask with olive oil and go." 1 Samuel 16:1
- **Question to consider:** What Saul am I still mourning?
- **Season check:** What new thing might God be asking me to anoint if I'm willing to let go of the old?

Day 38 • When the Anointing Lifts

"When he woke up, he thought, 'I will do as before and shake myself free.' But he didn't realize the LORD had left him." (Judges 16:20)

Those may be some of the most chilling words in the Bible.

Samson had been anointed as Israel's judge. Again and again, the Spirit of the Lord came upon him with supernatural strength. But he kept toying with compromise, and one day, when the Philistines came, he got up expecting things to work the way they always had.

They didn't. The anointing had lifted, and he didn't even notice.

Tunnel vision from the last season

Sometimes our biggest obstacle to hearing what God is saying now is tunnel vision from what God said before. Someone or something was anointed in a past season, so we assume it still is.

We need eyes that see and ears that hear, so we can discern when God's anointing has lifted from a person, a church, a movement, a career, a relationship, or even what we once thought was our divine purpose.

That's not cynicism. It's discernment. Favor and anointing can rise and set like the sun. In sports, Father Time retires every athlete eventually. In the church, it's more often a lack of character that ends a calling. Like Samson, some people don't survive their anointing.

Not every ending is a failure

But here's an important balance: not every necessary ending happens because someone sinned.

Paul and Barnabas were one of the great ministry partnerships in history. Barnabas had vouched for Paul when the other believers were still afraid of him. Together they planted churches across the Roman world.

Then they disagreed about whether to bring John Mark on their next journey. "Their disagreement was so sharp that they separated" (Acts 15:39). Barnabas took Mark. Paul took Silas. And instead of one missionary team, now there were two.

Years later, Paul wrote, "Bring Mark with you when you come, for he will be helpful to me in my ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11). The ending wasn't a failure. It was a release that multiplied the work, and it didn't require anyone to become an enemy.

The sons of Saul

There's one more part of Saul's story that most people miss. When Saul died on Mount Gilboa, three of his sons died with him, including Jonathan, one of the most faithful men in Scripture (1 Samuel 31:2).

Jonathan loved David. He knew God had chosen David. But he stayed loyal to his father's failing house to the end, and he died fighting a battle God had already judged.

The kingdoms of Saul only flourish as long as the sons of Saul refuse to leave. When we won't let go of generational mindsets, traditions of men or loyalties God has ended, we can find ourselves defending structures God has already left and paying a cost we were never meant to pay.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Not every ending is a failure; some are a release that multiplies the work.

- **Verse to remember:** "But he didn't realize the LORD had left him." Judges 16:20
- **Question to consider:** Where am I still expecting things to work "as before" in a season God has already ended?
- **Season check:** Is there a house of Saul I'm still fighting for out of loyalty, even though I know God has moved?

Day 39 • Love Everyone, Trust Few

"But Jesus didn't trust them, because he knew human nature." (John 2:24)

A young man once bristled when an older believer told him, "Love everyone, but don't trust everyone." It sounded unloving to him, even unchristian.

The older man smiled and asked him a few questions.

"Would you give your savings account to someone who has proven careless with money?"

"No."

"Would you let someone build your house just because you love them, even if they have no skill and no history of finishing what they start?"

"No, that would be foolish."

"Would you let someone do the plumbing in your home if they keep flooding every house they touch?"

The young man paused.

"You can love them, pray for them, honor them and treat them with dignity," the elder said. "But trust isn't something you hand out because you have a soft heart. Trust is stewardship. It's built through character, consistency, humility, repentance and fruit."

Love is freely given, because every person bears the image of God. Trust is earned, because access requires character.

Forgiveness is not restored trust

This may be one of the most important lessons in this whole book, because confusing these two has hurt so many people.

Scripture calls us to forgive freely. Jesus forgave the very people crucifying Him. But forgiveness does not automatically restore trust.

- **Forgiveness** releases the debt of the past. It's a gift I give.
- **Trust** concerns the present and the future. It has to be rebuilt through honesty, responsibility, accountability and visible change over time.

When churches, families or friendships treat forgiveness as automatic reinstatement, unhealthy systems grow. People who were hurt get silenced. Those who raise legitimate concerns get called unforgiving or divisive. And the people who caused harm get access again before anything has changed.

That isn't grace. It's a distortion of grace.

Jesus drew lines too

Jesus loved everyone, but He didn't give everyone the same access. He had the crowds, the seventy-two, the twelve, and the three who went with Him up the mountain and into the garden. And John tells us plainly that Jesus didn't entrust Himself to some people, "because he knew human nature."

He even drew a boundary with His own family. When His mother and brothers came to interrupt His teaching, He said, "Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!" (Matthew 12:50). That wasn't dishonor. It was clarity about who would shape His mission.

Your circle of trust

So who gets an all-access pass to your life? Here are six marks of someone in your inner circle:

They...	Scripture
Know me: my values and personality	Jonathan and David became one in spirit (1 Samuel 18:1)
Respect me: they honor my boundaries	Do to others what you'd want them to do to you (Matthew 7:12)
Support me: they encourage and help	Encourage one another and build each other up (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
Protect me: they defend me when I'm not in the room	"A friend is always loyal" (Proverbs 17:17)
Correct me: they tell me the truth	"Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy" (Proverbs 27:6)
Demonstrate to me: they live with Christlike character	Follow me as I follow Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1)

The last one matters most. And here's the test that goes with it: *Who in my life can correct me without needing my permission, without causing offense, and without being cut off?* If the answer is no one, I may be more on the island of isolation than I realized.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Love is freely given; trust is earned, because access requires character.
- **Verse to remember:** "Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy." Proverbs 27:6
- **Question to consider:** Where have I confused forgiveness with giving back full access?
- **Season check:** Who has an all-access pass to my life right now, and do they meet the six marks?



Circle of trust

★
↑
YOU

**YOU ARE
ONE
FRIENDSHIP
AWAY...**
— FROM YOUR —
DESTINY
— OR YOUR —
DESTRUCTION

Day 40 • An Open Hand

"Then the LORD asked him, 'What is that in your hand?' 'A shepherd's staff,' Moses replied. 'Throw it down on the ground,' the LORD told him." (Exodus 4:2-3)

Mark was a good-hearted personal trainer who hated making people uncomfortable. When a new client joined, eager but undisciplined, Mark let things slide. Lighter weights. Skipped conditioning. Gentle corrections. His client left every session feeling encouraged.

Months later, the client was still out of shape, frustrated, and dependent on Mark's sympathy instead of growing stronger.

So Mark changed. Precise corrections. Harder sets. Firm accountability. The client called it harsh and almost quit. But because Mark pushed without breaking him, holding clear standards and celebrating small wins, the client finally began to grow in strength, confidence and independence.

Sympathy without a tether

Mark's first approach is what I call untethered sympathy: compassion that has lost its connection to truth.

One of the greatest mistakes we make is judging a person's limp without trying to understand the wound that caused it. Many people carry fear, anger, insecurity, addiction or manipulation because of what shaped them long before we met them. Understanding that creates compassion.

But explanation is not justification.

Understanding why someone behaves destructively doesn't mean we remove accountability, boundaries, correction or consequences. When compassion exists without

discernment, people get an all-access pass without any evidence of repentance or change. And "a little yeast spreads through the whole batch of dough" (1 Corinthians 5:6).

Jesus modeled both compassion and confrontation. He understood broken people deeply, and He still called them to repentance, holiness and truth. Love doesn't ignore what's destroying someone. Love addresses it so restoration can happen.

The price of people-pleasing

The priest Eli was a kind man with two corrupt sons. He knew what they were doing, but he only scolded them gently and never removed them. God's verdict was devastating: "Why do you give your sons more honor than you give me?" (1 Samuel 2:29).

Eli's sympathy for his sons cost them their lives and cost Israel the ark of God. People-pleasing always looks kind in the moment. It's rarely kind in the end.

You can't conquer what you don't confront, and you can't confront what you don't identify.

What's in your hand?

When God called Moses at the burning bush, He asked a simple question: "*What is that in your hand?*" It was a shepherd's staff, the symbol of Moses's whole identity and livelihood. And God told him to throw it down.

When Moses let go, the staff became something God could use. Later it parted the Red Sea.

That question asks two things of us. First, *what has God placed in your hand that He's calling you to steward with excellence?* And second, *are you willing to keep an open*

hand? Every good gift God gives is also a test of whether our allegiance is to the dream or to the Dream-Giver.

A closed fist holds tightly to people, possessions, roles and promises out of fear and control. An open hand trusts God enough to release what He asks for, and to receive what He gives next.

That's the season of Release. Not losing what you love, but trusting the One who loves you with what's in your hand.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Explanation is not justification.
- **Verse to remember:** "Then the LORD asked him, 'What is that in your hand?'" Exodus 4:2
- **Question to consider:** Where has my sympathy lost its tether to truth?
- **Season check:** What am I holding with a closed fist? What would it look like to open my hand today?

For Small Groups • Week 8 • Release

Meet once after Day 40. This week may stir grief about relationships, roles or dreams people are letting go of. Make room for tears, and keep what's shared in the room. Never pressure anyone to end a relationship; help each other listen to God.

1. **Open:** Read John 15:2 aloud. Ask: what has pruning felt like in your life?
2. **Day 36:** Where might you look healthy on the outside but be struggling on the inside? Who has permission to tell you?
3. **Day 37:** What "Saul" are you still mourning? What might God be asking you to anoint next?
4. **Day 38:** Have you experienced an ending that turned out to be a release that multiplied the work, like Paul and Barnabas?
5. **Day 39:** Where have you confused forgiveness with giving back full access? Who is in your circle of trust?
6. **Day 40:** Where has your sympathy lost its tether to truth? What are you holding with a closed fist?

Practice together: Have each person write a short release prayer for one person, role or thing God is asking them to let go of. Read them silently, then pray together with open hands.

Pray: Pray for anyone grieving a necessary ending: for comfort in the grief, courage to keep the boundary God has shown them, and hope for what He's bringing next.

Week 9 • Reward

Day 41 • What You Misdiagnose, You Will Mistreat

"Fire tests the purity of silver and gold, but a person is tested by being praised." (Proverbs 27:21)

After a successful college career, I was preparing for the NFL Combine. In my mind, all the hard work had already been done. I was looking forward to being drafted high and stepping into what I thought was my reward season.

Then one day, I was sitting in my studio apartment watching the MC Hammer story on VH1. It showed how he went from fortune and fame to bankruptcy.

At the time, I wondered: *Is God showing me my future?*

Looking back, I believe it was less a prediction and more a prophetic warning.

The warning

The warning was this: Do not misdiagnose success as the automatic signature of God's pleasure. Sometimes success is not the reward. Sometimes success is the test.

God was showing me that if I misdiagnosed the next season as only a blessing, I might mistreat it. I might think the platform proved my character, when in reality, the platform was about to reveal it.

Because what you misdiagnose, you will mistreat.

"In the world, power is the goal. In the Kingdom of God, power is the test." — Peter Vescovi

I listened

I heeded that warning, and obeying it opened a door I didn't expect.

Growing up, I had watched my dad mis-steward his finances, and I lived with the consequences. That was a wound. But God used that wound as an invitation. In the very area where I had no example to follow, He became my teacher. Over time, that warning led to a revelation I now call the five pillars of finances.

The collateral damage I saw growing up shook me with the fear of the Lord. And by the grace of God, my wife and I have never had a financial crisis in our marriage. Not because we're smarter than anyone else, but because I had already seen where the other road leads.

And what God taught me, I now get to teach others. The lesson that began in a studio apartment became something I pass on. The wound I inherited became wisdom I could pay forward.

Power reveals

Abraham Lincoln is often credited with saying, "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."

Power often reveals what adversity can conceal. Adversity exposes our need to depend on God. Power reveals our true character, and what we're capable of when we believe we no longer need God's help.

A person may appear humble while suffering. But power reveals whether that humility was truly formed, or simply forced by hard circumstances.

Cultural Christianity prepares people to endure hardship and pain. It often fails to warn them that influence, platform, money, anointing and applause are tests too.

C. S. Lewis saw the same danger. Prosperity, he wrote, "knits a man to the world. He feels that he is 'finding his place in it', while really it is finding its place in him."

The reward season

That is what the season of Reward is about. God does reward faithfulness. But the reward season is not the end of the test; it is a different kind of test. The question is no longer "Will you survive the fire?" It's "Will you steward the gold?"

That afternoon in a studio apartment was the beginning of a lifelong lesson in stewardship. This week, we'll look at what God puts in our hands, especially power and money, and the heart it takes to carry them without being crushed by them.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Sometimes success is not the reward; sometimes success is the test.
- **Verse to remember:** "Fire tests the purity of silver and gold, but a person is tested by being praised." Proverbs 27:21
- **Question to consider:** Am I treating a blessing in my life as proof of my character, or as a test of it?
- **Season check:** What has God put in my hands right now (money, influence, a platform, a gift) that He's asking me to steward rather than simply enjoy?

Day 42 • Power or Presence

"No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money." (Matthew 6:24)

Jesus talked about money more than He talked about heaven or hell. As Peter Vescovi points out, money must be a big deal to Jesus, and there must be something really dangerous about it.

In Luke 16, Jesus taught that how we handle money reveals whether we can be trusted with true riches. And Luke records how one group responded: "The Pharisees, who dearly loved their money, heard all this and scoffed at him" (Luke 16:14).

That surprised me the first time I noticed it. The Pharisees were the most religious people in Israel. Why would *they* be lovers of money?

What money really buys

Here's what I believe: **People love money because they love the power and independence it gives them.**

Think about it. When you have enough money, you don't have to wait on anyone, including God. You can move by your own will instead of His. Money lets you skip the manna and stock your own pantry.

John Piper describes the love of money as "a condition of the heart that feels more security, more pleasure, and more hope in earthly possessions than it does in the fellowship, the goodness and faithfulness of God."

The Pharisees loved money because they loved power and control more than the presence of God. That's still the

temptation today. **Pharisees love power. Disciples love presence.**

Same pursuit, different motive

The pursuit of power and the pursuit of presence can look similar on the surface. Both people pray. Both serve. Both may even prosper. The difference is the motive underneath.

The pursuit of power is driven by performance: a need for identity, status or security. The pursuit of presence is driven by intimacy: a longing to know God and obey Him.

Power isn't wrong in itself. But it should be a byproduct of intimacy, never the goal. It's like marrying someone only for physical intimacy instead of building a real relationship. You might get what you wanted, but you'll miss what matters most.

Three ways to see money

Most Christians fall into one of three views of money:

1. **"It's 100 percent mine."** I earned it, so I decide.
2. **"It's 90 percent mine and 10 percent God's."** I give Him His share, and the rest is mine.
3. **"It's 100 percent God's."** I'm a steward of all of it.

The first is ownership. The second is ownership with a religious tax. Only the third is stewardship. The ownership mentality is rooted in love of self: *It's mine because I earned it*. The stewardship mentality is rooted in love for God and others: *Your Kingdom come, Your will be done*.

"If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones... And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven?" (Luke 16:10-11).

Or, as Peter Vescovi puts it: **"In the world, money is the goal. In the Kingdom, money is the test."**

Silver, gold and power

There's an old story, recorded by the scholar F. F. Bruce, about Thomas Aquinas visiting the pope while a large sum of money was being counted. "You see, Thomas," the pope said, "the church can no longer say, 'Silver and gold have I none.'"

"True, holy father," Aquinas replied. "Neither can she now say, 'Rise and walk.'"

Peter had no silver or gold, but he had the presence and power of God (Acts 3:6). It's possible to gain the money and lose the miracle.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Pharisees love power; disciples love presence.
- **Verse to remember:** "You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money." Matthew 6:24
- **Question to consider:** Which of the three views of money best describes how I actually live?
- **Season check:** What does my spending say I value most? Where am I using money to avoid waiting on God?

Day 43 • Out of Egypt

*"God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs."
(Matthew 5:3)*

On Day 14, I told you about a lie I believed about God because of my dad: *I have to be my own provider*. Today I want to tell you where that lie took me.

Growing up, I saw the collateral damage of poorly stewarded finances. It shook me with the fear of the Lord. And by the grace of God, my wife and I have never had a financial crisis in our marriage.

But here's what I didn't expect. For roughly the first ten years of our marriage, it was hard for me to even look at our bank account or sit down with a budget. Not because we were in trouble. We weren't. It was because something in me was still afraid.

We don't always remember our trauma, but our nervous system does.

Legally free, still in Egypt

The best way I can describe it is this: **Fear kept me in an Egyptian mindset of slavery, even though legally I was in the promised land.**

My pendulum didn't swing toward excess like the story on Day 41. It swung the other way, toward a mindset of lack, even while we were walking in financial blessing. On the outside it looked like wisdom. On the inside it was fear.

Israel left Egypt in a day. But it took forty years for Egypt to leave Israel. They complained about manna and missed the leeks and onions of slavery, because their bodies were free but their minds were still counting bricks.

The wounds we pick up around money can come from any direction. Growing up wealthy can teach us that our worth is in what we own. Growing up middle class can teach us that security comes from keeping up. Growing up in poverty can teach us that there will never be enough. When God isn't shown to us as the ultimate Provider, any of those can open the door to what I call a spirit of poverty.

Poor in spirit or spiritual poverty?

Those two phrases sound alike, but they're opposites.

- **Poor in spirit** means total dependence on God. "I can't provide for myself, and I don't have to. My Father will."
- **Spiritual poverty** is a mindset that says, "I'm my own provider, and there's never enough."

Here's how they compare:

Poor in spirit	Spiritual poverty
The spirit of adoption	The orphan spirit
Dependence	Independence
Stewardship	Ownership
Trusting God and His Word	Trusting myself and my performance

Notice that spiritual poverty can live in a rich person just as easily as a poor one. You can have plenty in the bank and still live like an orphan who has to hoard every crumb.

Sons don't hoard

Jesus spoke directly to this anxiety: "So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and

live righteously, and he will give you everything you need" (Matthew 6:31-33).

In the wilderness, God gave Israel manna every morning, just enough for that day. Anyone who tried to hoard it found it full of maggots the next morning (Exodus 16:20). God was retraining slaves to trust a Father.

He's still doing that. Healing for me didn't come from making more money. It came from learning, one day at a time, that I'm not my own provider. I'm a son.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Fear can keep me in an Egypt mindset even when I'm legally in the promised land.
- **Verse to remember:** "Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need." Matthew 6:33
- **Question to consider:** What did I learn about money growing up, and which lie did it plant in me?
- **Season check:** Has my pendulum swung toward excess or toward lack? What would living as a son, not an orphan, look like with my money this week?

Day 44 • The Five Pillars of Kingdom Finances

"If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones." (Luke 16:10)

When I heeded the warning God gave me in that studio apartment, it led to a revelation I now call the five pillars of Kingdom finances. These aren't a get-rich plan. They're a framework for stewarding whatever God puts in your hands, whether that's a little or a lot.

First, sort the gray areas

Before the pillars, one helpful tool. Adapted from a distinction Dave Ramsey often makes, there are four different kinds of guidance when it comes to money:

Kind	What it is	Example
Principle	An absolute command for everyone	"You must not steal" (Exodus 20:15)
Personal conviction	A personal rule before God; don't judge others by it	Paul on disputed matters (Romans 14:1-3)
Prudence	Wisdom to govern yourself well	"The borrower is servant to the lender" (Proverbs 22:7)
Preference	A free choice, neither right nor wrong	Mary's costly perfume poured on Jesus (John 12:3)

Principles are black and white. Convictions, prudence and preferences are gray areas guided by wisdom, experience and the Spirit. Many money arguments between believers happen because someone treats a preference like a principle (remember Day 34).

The five pillars

1. Debt as spiritual slavery. "Just as the rich rule the poor, so the borrower is servant to the lender" (Proverbs 22:7). Debt can entangle us and limit our freedom to respond when God leads. In 2 Kings 4, a widow was about to lose her sons to a creditor until God multiplied her oil through Elisha. God's heart is to break financial bondage. "Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another" (Romans 13:8).

2. The heart of giving. "You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. 'For God loves a person who gives cheerfully'" (2 Corinthians 9:7). The Macedonian believers gave beyond their means even in deep poverty, because giving was overflow, not obligation (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). Legalism stifles generosity. Love liberates it.

3. Tithing and generosity. Abraham gave a tenth to Melchizedek long before the law (Genesis 14:20). God invites us through Malachi to "bring all the tithes into the storehouse" and "put me to the test" (Malachi 3:10). The tithe trains our trust. But generosity goes beyond percentages. The question isn't whether ten percent is the ceiling. It's whether it's the floor.

4. Seven years of plenty, seven years of famine. Joseph advised Pharaoh to store up grain in the good years for the famine ahead (Genesis 41:35-36), and he saved nations by it. "Take a lesson from the ants, you lazybones... they labor hard all summer, gathering food for the winter" (Proverbs 6:6, 8). Saving in seasons of plenty isn't a lack of faith. It's stewardship that prepares for the next season.

5. Biblical stewardship. "Know the state of your flocks, and put your heart into caring for your herds, for riches don't last forever" (Proverbs 27:23-24). Jesus said no one

builds a tower without first counting the cost (Luke 14:28). Tracking what God has given you isn't unspiritual. In the parable of the talents, the faithful servants knew exactly what they'd been given and what they'd gained (Matthew 25:14-30).

Money reveals

"Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be" (Matthew 6:21). Money reveals your value system more than it reveals your significance. Look at a person's bank statement and calendar, and you'll see what they truly worship.

The pillars aren't about money. They're about a heart that says, *All of it is Yours*.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Money reveals my value system more than it reveals my significance.
- **Verse to remember:** "Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be." Matthew 6:21
- **Question to consider:** Which of the five pillars is strongest in my life, and which is weakest?
- **Season check:** Pick one pillar and one step: reduce a debt, give cheerfully, set aside savings, or track my spending this week. Which will I do?

Day 45 • Enough or More

*"Give me neither poverty nor riches! Give me just enough to satisfy my needs. For if I grow rich, I may deny you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' And if I am too poor, I may steal and thus insult God's holy name."
(Proverbs 30:8-9)*

Tucked near the end of Proverbs is a prayer from a man named Agur. We don't know much about him. But his prayer may be one of the wisest money prayers in the Bible.

He doesn't ask to be rich. He doesn't ask to be poor. He asks for *enough*.

And he explains why. He knows himself. If he has too much, he might forget God. If he has too little, he might be tempted to dishonor God. Agur understood what this whole week has been about: both abundance and lack are tests.

Both ditches

On Day 41, I told you about the warning against misdiagnosing success, the road toward excess. On Day 43, I told you about my own pendulum swinging toward a mindset of lack. Agur names both ditches and asks God to keep him on the road between them.

Paul learned the same thing: "I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little" (Philippians 4:12).

The secret isn't the amount. It's the source. "For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13).

Thorns that choke

Jesus warned that some people hear God's Word, but "the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things crowd out the message so that no fruit is produced" (Mark 4:19).

Notice that worry and wealth are in the same sentence. Anxiety about not having enough and the lure of having more do the same thing to our hearts: they crowd out God's Word.

"For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows" (1 Timothy 6:10). There's a difference between respecting money and loving it. Respect stewards it. Love serves it.

Why this matters now

Scripture tells us that some of the greatest tests at the end of this age will be economic. In Revelation, the mark of the beast determines whether people can buy or sell (Revelation 13:17). Rick Joyner has warned that if we aren't freed from the spirit of poverty, wealth will only further corrupt us.

I don't say that to stir up fear. I say it because a healthy view of money isn't optional for disciples. It's preparation. The people who will stand in the hardest seasons are the ones who've already settled the question: *Is God my Provider, or am I?*

The end of the Reward season

This week began in a studio apartment, with a warning that success can be a test instead of a reward. It ends with a simple prayer for enough.

The true reward of this season isn't money, platform or applause. It's what God told Abram long ago: "Do not be

afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great" (Genesis 15:1). Some translations say it more simply: *I am your exceedingly great reward.*

"Don't love money; be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, 'I will never fail you. I will never abandon you'" (Hebrews 13:5).

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Both abundance and lack are tests; the secret is not the amount but the source.
- **Verse to remember:** "Give me neither poverty nor riches! Give me just enough to satisfy my needs."
Proverbs 30:8
- **Question to consider:** Am I pursuing "enough" or "more"?
- **Season check:** Which ditch am I closer to right now, excess or lack? Pray Agur's prayer today in your own words.

For Small Groups • Week 9 • Reward

Meet once after Day 45. Money is one of the hardest things for believers to talk about honestly. Leaders, go first, keep the conversation free of judgment, and never ask anyone to share numbers.

1. **Open:** Read Proverbs 27:21 aloud. Ask: have you ever experienced success as a test rather than a reward?
2. **Day 41:** Where might you be tempted to see a blessing as proof of your character instead of a test of it?
3. **Day 42:** Which of the three views of money (100% mine, 90/10, or 100% God's) best describes how you actually live?
4. **Day 43:** What did you learn about money growing up? Has your pendulum swung toward excess or toward lack?
5. **Day 44:** Which of the five pillars is strongest in your life? Which is weakest?
6. **Day 45:** Are you pursuing "enough" or "more"?

Practice together: Have each person choose one pillar and one practical step for the next month: paying down a debt, giving cheerfully, starting to save, or tracking spending. Pair up and check on each other.

This month: Invite one honest person to ask you about money, power and purity.

Pray: Pray Agur's prayer together: "Give us neither poverty nor riches. Give us just enough, so that we never forget You."

Week 10 • Repeat

Day 46 • Pay It Forward

"Break the cycle by doing for others that which was not done for you." — Peter Vescovi

When my son was eighteen, he snapped his tibia in a game. It was a clean break, and he was screaming on the field.

The second I saw it, something in me sighed: *Here we go again.*

Same leg. A similar fracture. Mine had broken into my knee and left me with terrible arthritis. Back then, nobody guided my rehab. I taught myself with a boombox, a jump rope and whatever weights I could scrounge.

This time, I wasn't letting that happen.

The garage

I told the doctors I would handle his rehab myself. Six days a week we worked in the garage: bands, sled pushes, single-leg squats, ice baths. The whole stubborn routine.

Every session, we played the same song on repeat: "God Did" by DJ Khaled. Something about the beat, the bass and the chorus made the burn feel holy. He'd grimace, I'd count the reps, and we'd both mouth the words like a prayer.

Eight months later, he was back on the field. He was faster and springier, carrying twenty pounds of muscle he didn't have before the injury. The break didn't steal his athleticism. It upgraded it.

Eighty years

That was more than two years ago. Now when I hear that song, it hits different.

I've been moving through what I call the nine seasons of the Kingdom of God in my own life. Some were great seasons. Some were brutal wilderness years. This revelation of the nine seasons forced me to reexamine everything.

Then the Lord dropped a quiet bomb He had whispered to me years before. Moses didn't spend forty years in the wilderness. He spent eighty. Forty in the desert of Midian after fleeing Pharaoh, where God wrecked his pride on the backside of the desert. Then forty more leading Israel through the wilderness (Acts 7:30, 36).

Eighty years of learning what only the wilderness can teach. The first forty made him a son. The second forty made him a father to a nation.

Not many fathers

Then Paul's words landed fresh: "For even if you had ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, you have only one spiritual father" (1 Corinthians 4:15).

Teachers give you a map for the wilderness. Fathers grab your hand and limp through it with you.

That's what I got to do for my son. I got to be the father I never had in my own rehab. I didn't just tell him how to come back. I sat next to him with our sweat mixing and the song blaring, wrapping his leg in ice, breaking generational curses one rep at a time.

"God Did" isn't just a victory lap anymore. It's the soundtrack of a decision: *I will do for others what nobody did for me.*

All those years, God was fathering me in the places my own father didn't know how to show up. Now it was my turn.

Learning to be a man

Years later, I realized something even deeper. God wasn't just teaching me how to father a son. He was teaching me how to be a man.

He taught me how to be the kind of husband that, if my daughter brought home a man with my character, I wouldn't feel nervous for her. He taught me how to build and run a business as a Kingdom activist, not just an entrepreneur.

And He taught me one of the most important lessons of my life: what biblical purity really looks like. It means honoring God's daughters, making them feel valued rather than objectified. It means breaking the generational curses of sexual depravity, financial collapse and treating a spouse like a roommate instead of a soulmate.

God didn't just heal my son's leg. He healed a lineage, starting with me. "It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies" (Zechariah 4:6).

The season that repeats

This is what the season of Repeat is about. The seasons come around again, sometimes in the same leg, with the same break. But you're not the same person standing on the sideline.

The first time through, you survive the season. The next time, you get to father someone through it.

"It was by faith that Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to share the oppression of God's people instead of enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin. He thought it was better to suffer for the sake of Christ than to own the treasures of Egypt, for he was

looking ahead to his great reward." (Hebrews 11:24-26)

Who is standing where you once stood, waiting for someone to grab their hand?

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** Teachers give you a map for the wilderness. Fathers walk through it with you.
- **Verse to remember:** "For even if you had ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, you have only one spiritual father." 1 Corinthians 4:15
- **Question to consider:** What was never done for me that God is now asking me to do for someone else?
- **Season check:** Which season is repeating in my life or my family right now, and how am I walking through it differently this time?

Day 47 • Not Many Fathers

*"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!"
(John 14:9)*

A woman once told me, "I can't have a father wound. My dad was the best." He took her to church, prayed at dinner, fixed her bike and never missed a school play.

I asked her, "Do you ever struggle with anger?"

She nodded. "More than I should."

"Can you think of a time your father protected you growing up?"

Her eyes widened. She remembered a boy who teased her on the school bus. Her mom blamed her. Her dad just patted her head and said, "Ignore him, sweetheart." She wanted him to stand up for her. He never did.

"He was loving and faithful in so many ways," she said slowly. "But he wasn't a protector. I always thought a father wound meant a lack of love. I never realized it could be a lack of feeling defended." Then she added, "No wonder I always feel like I have to defend myself. It never occurred to me that it's God's job to defend me."

Re-presenting the Father

Every father, and every spiritual father or mother, is meant to *re-present* God: to stand for Him and show others what He is like. Jesus did that perfectly. "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

I believe Scripture shows five roles a father carries. Each one has a strength, and each one has a danger when it's out of balance:

Role	What it looks like	The danger
Priest	Intercedes for the family in daily prayer, like Job praying for his children (Job 1:5)	Grace without boundaries, leaving children confused about sin
Prophet	Speaks truth and wisdom, teaching consequences and calling children toward God (Deuteronomy 6:6-7)	Becoming overbearing and controlling
Protector	Creates a safe home and stands between his family and danger (Proverbs 14:26)	Overprotecting, so children never learn to face challenges
Provider	Works diligently to meet needs and plan for the future (1 Timothy 5:8)	Neglecting presence for the sake of provision
Professor	Values wisdom and discernment, and models lifelong learning (Proverbs 4:7)	Pride, or love that depends on achievement

Most of us had fathers who were strong in some of these and missing in others. Most of us who are parents are the same.

What fathers and mothers give

Here's a simple way I've come to understand it:

- **Father: protection + provision = identity** (a sense of purpose)
- **Mother: comfort + nurturing = unconditional love** (a sense of value)

When one is missing, we drift toward one of the orphan mindsets from Day 12. Identity without unconditional love tends to produce a religious orphan, always performing. Unconditional love without identity tends to produce a rebellious orphan, loved but directionless.

We need both. And God is both: the Father who defends us and the One who comforts us "as a mother comforts her child" (Isaiah 66:13).

Your turn to re-present

The season of Repeat is when we become for others what someone was, or wasn't, for us. Not perfectly. Jesus is the only perfect re-presentation of the Father. But faithfully.

Which of the five roles comes naturally to you? Which one will you need God's help to grow into?

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** A father wound can be a lack of protection, not just a lack of love.
- **Verse to remember:** "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!" John 14:9
- **Question to consider:** Which of the five roles were strong in my father, and which were missing?
- **Season check:** Which role do I most need to grow into for the people God has given me?

Day 48 • Three Ways to Wound a Child

"Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord." (Ephesians 6:4)

There's an African proverb that has stayed with me for years: *"The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth."*

So much of the anger, rebellion and self-destruction we see in a generation comes from children who were never embraced. Paul warned fathers directly not to provoke their children to anger. Looking through Scripture, I see three common ways it happens.

1. Abandonment: laying them on the altar

In Jeremiah's day, God's people "built pagan shrines to Baal, and there they burn their sons as sacrifices to Baal" (Jeremiah 19:5). It's one of the most horrifying images in the Bible.

We don't build altars to Baal today. But we can still sacrifice our children on the altars of career, ministry, success or our own pleasure. Absence tells a child, *You're not worth my time*. That produces rejection and a deep sense of worthlessness.

2. Enablement: dipping them in gold

The opposite error looks loving. It's the home where the children become the center of the universe and can never be told no.

God judged Eli "because his sons are blaspheming God and he hasn't disciplined them" (1 Samuel 3:13). Eli honored his sons more than he honored God (Day 40). A child-centered

home produces entitlement, and entitled children grow into adults who can't handle correction from anyone, including God.

3. Abuse: breaking the bruised reed

The third way is crushing a child's will and spirit through physical or emotional harm. Jesus is the opposite: "He will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle" (Isaiah 42:3).

"A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit saps a person's strength" (Proverbs 17:22). Abuse doesn't just hurt in the moment. It can drain the life out of someone for decades.

If this was your story

Maybe you read those three and recognized your childhood. If so, here is the good news.

If you or a child you know is being harmed right now, please don't wait. Tell a trusted pastor, counselor or friend, and contact local authorities. God's heart for the bruised reed includes getting them safe.

You are a product of your past, but you are not a prisoner to it. Jesus Himself knew loss. Joseph, his earthly father, disappears from the Gospels after Jesus is twelve, and most believe he died before Jesus began His ministry. Yet Jesus was always fully secure as the Son of God.

"Father to the fatherless, defender of widows—this is God, whose dwelling is holy. God places the lonely in families" (Psalm 68:5-6). Earthly pain cannot cancel divine purpose.

And if you're a parent, it's not too late. When a man is distracted and a woman is discouraged, the enemy destroys.

But when a father or mother turns their heart back toward their children, God can restore what was lost.

Breaking the cycle

This is why the season of Repeat matters. Hurt people hurt people. Unhealed fathers wound their children in the same places they were wounded, and the cycle continues for generations.

But healed people heal people. When you let God father you in the places your father couldn't, you become free to father others well. That's how the cycle breaks: not by willpower, but by letting God do in you what He wants to do through you.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** I am a product of my past, but I am not a prisoner to it.
- **Verse to remember:** "God places the lonely in families." Psalm 68:6
- **Question to consider:** Which of the three wounds, abandonment, enablement or abuse, have I received? Which am I most at risk of passing on?
- **Season check:** Where do I need to let God father me before I can father someone else?

Day 49 • Write It Down

"Write my answer plainly on tablets, so that a runner can carry the correct message to others." (Habakkuk 2:2)

Solomon died as one of the richest men who ever lived. But one generation later, his son Rehoboam lost most of the kingdom in a single afternoon, because he rejected the wise counsel of his father's advisers and listened to his friends instead (1 Kings 12). A few generations after that, the royal treasury was so depleted that King Asa took the silver and gold from the temple itself to buy a foreign king's help (1 Kings 15:18).

The money vanished. The wisdom never transferred.

Family wealth advisers say the same pattern still repeats today. Fortunes rarely survive to the third generation, and the reason usually isn't taxes or bad investments. It's that the values and purpose behind the wealth were never passed down.

A different kind of inheritance

A man I knew passed away in his late seventies. He left behind a substantial estate. But he also left a stack of spiral notebooks: more than twenty years of handwritten journals he had titled "What the Lord Showed Me."

His granddaughter, still a teenager, found them after the funeral. She started reading one entry each night. Within months, she was leading a prayer group of college students. Within a couple of years, she had started a house of prayer.

The money is still sitting in a trust, barely touched. But the revelation, written down, became fuel for the next generation.

The inheritance that survives is never measured in dollars. It's measured in pages the next generation can run with.

Another generation grew up

The book of Judges records one of the saddest sentences in the Bible: "After that generation died, another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the LORD or remember the mighty things he had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10).

Joshua's generation saw the walls of Jericho fall. Their children didn't even know the story. Somewhere, the passing down stopped.

Compare that with King David. David wasn't allowed to build the temple; that job belonged to Solomon. But before he died, David gave Solomon detailed plans for every part of it. "'Every part of this plan,' David told Solomon, 'was given to me in writing from the hand of the LORD'" (1 Chronicles 28:19).

David couldn't finish the house. But he could write down what God had shown him so his son could.

Your notebooks

"Good people leave an inheritance to their grandchildren" (Proverbs 13:22). That inheritance may include money. But the most important part is what God has shown you.

In a way, this book is my notebook. These stories, the good ones and the painful ones, are what the Lord showed me through nine seasons. I've written them down so you can run with them.

Now it's your turn. What has God shown you that the next generation needs to read?

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** The inheritance that survives is measured in pages the next generation can run with.
- **Verse to remember:** "Write my answer plainly on tablets, so that a runner can carry the correct message to others." Habakkuk 2:2
- **Question to consider:** What has God shown me in my seasons that I've never written down?
- **Season check:** Start your own "What the Lord Showed Me" notebook this week. What's the first entry?

Day 50 • For a Generation You Won't See

*"His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers."
(Malachi 4:6)*

The Old Testament ends with a promise. The very last verse says God will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.

Then heaven went silent for four hundred years.

When God finally spoke again, the angel who announced John the Baptist's birth quoted that exact promise (Luke 1:17). The work of preparing a people for Jesus began with healing the relationship between generations.

I believe He's still doing that work. And I believe the season of Repeat is where we join it.

Four generations in one verse

Paul wrote to Timothy, his spiritual son: "You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others" (2 Timothy 2:2).

Count the generations in that verse. Paul. Timothy. Trustworthy people. Others. Four generations of disciples in one sentence. Paul wasn't just thinking about Timothy. He was thinking about people he would never meet.

The heroes of Hebrews 11 lived the same way. "All these people earned a good reputation because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. For God had something better in mind for us, so that they would not reach perfection without us" (Hebrews 11:39-40).

They lived for a generation they would never see. And that generation is us.

Back where we started

Think back to Day 1. I told you about Charles Xavier speaking to his younger self, and the Lord saying, "*You have something better than that. You have My written Word.*" My younger self asked, "Why is this so hard?" And the answer was, "Because you prayed for it."

Now you've walked through all nine seasons:

- **Refinement**, where pressure trains you instead of punishing you
- **Repentance**, where you come home as a son or daughter
- **Revival**, where the Holy Spirit becomes a Person you know
- **Reformation**, where your life is rebuilt on God's Word
- **Recalculate**, where God reroutes you in mercy
- **Revolution**, where you're sent to your mountain
- **Release**, where you let go of what has finished its season
- **Reward**, where blessing tests your heart
- **Repeat**, where you become for someone else what God has been for you

And here's the secret of Repeat: the cycle doesn't end. You'll walk through these seasons again. But each time, you won't just survive them. You'll be trained in them. And eventually, you'll be the older voice speaking back to someone younger: "*I know it's hard. Remember what you prayed for. God is forming something in you that you can't yet see.*"

Who will you walk with?

A teacher gives you a map for the wilderness. A father or mother takes your hand and walks through it with you.

You don't need to be perfect to do that. I certainly wasn't. You just need to be a few steps ahead, willing to be honest about your scars and faithful to point people to the Father.

So here is my question for you on the last day of this journey: **Who is God asking you to walk with through their seasons?**

Ask Him for a name. Then go do for them what someone did, or didn't do, for you.

Thinking About It

- **Point to ponder:** I'm living for a generation I may never see.
- **Verse to remember:** "Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others." 2 Timothy 2:2
- **Question to consider:** Which of the nine seasons am I in now, and how has the way I'm walking through it changed over these 50 days?
- **Season check:** Who is God asking me to walk with through their seasons? Write their name down, and reach out this week.

For Small Groups • Week 10 • Repeat and Commissioning

This is your last meeting, so plan a little extra time. Consider sharing a meal together. This week is about celebrating what God has done and sending each other out.

1. **Open:** Read Malachi 4:6 aloud. Ask: who has been a spiritual father or mother to you?
2. **Day 46:** What was never done for you that God is now asking you to do for someone else?
3. **Day 47:** Which of the five roles (priest, prophet, protector, provider, professor) were strong in your father? Which do you most need to grow into?
4. **Day 48:** Where do you need to let God father you before you can father someone else?
5. **Day 49:** What has God shown you that the next generation needs to read?
6. **Day 50:** Looking back over 50 days, which season surprised you most? Which one are you in right now?

Practice together: If you took the 63-question assessment on Day 5, take it again now and compare. Share one thing that changed.

Commissioning: Have each person share the name of one person they'll walk with through their seasons. Then gather around each person, lay hands on them and pray: "Father, make them a father or mother to the next generation. Give them a burning lamp and a faithful heart."

Going forward: Consider leading this journey with a new group, with each of you inviting the person whose name you shared.

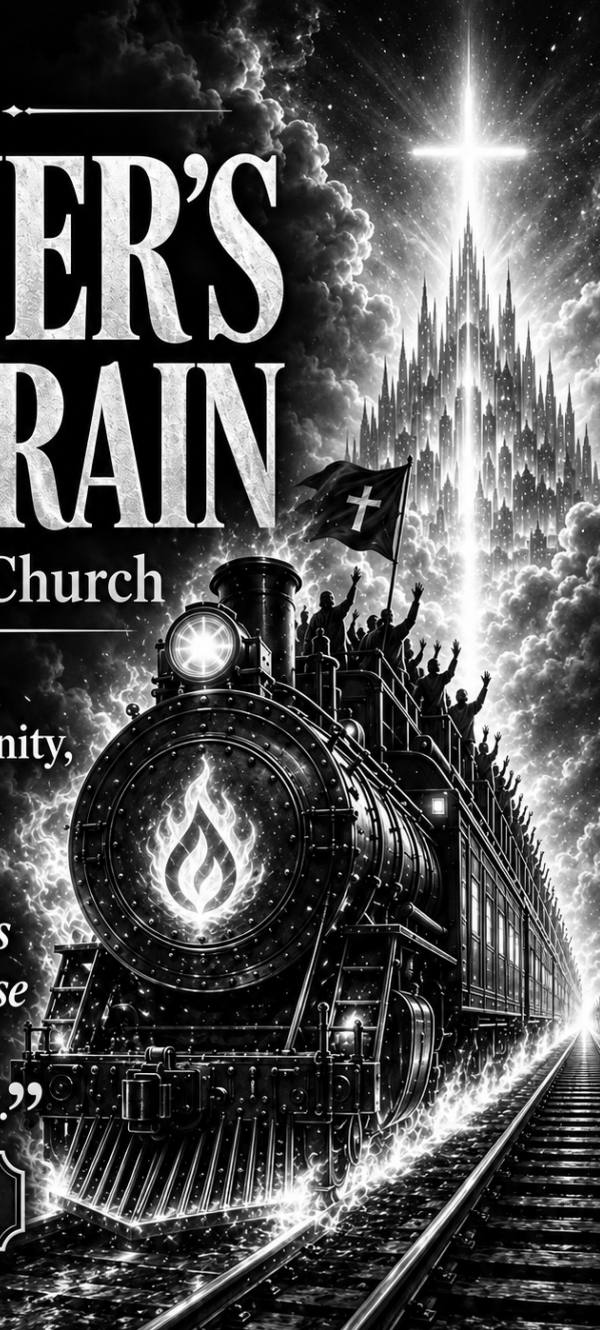
THE REFINER'S FIRE TRAIN

The End-Times Church

God showed me a train
thundering toward eternity,
its engine blazing with
holy fire.

*“This is My Refiner’s
Fire train. It’s for those
who want all of Me—
no half-hearted riders.”*

MALACHI 3:3



Epilogue • The Refiner's Fire Train

"I will bring that group through the fire and make them pure. I will refine them like silver and purify them like gold. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'These are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'" (Zechariah 13:9)

I want to leave you with a picture God showed me.

I saw a train racing toward eternity, its engine blazing with holy fire.

"This is My Refiner's Fire train," He said. "It's for those who want all of Me. No half-hearted riders."

The passengers, His remnant, His end-times church, climbed aboard with tears and cheers, ready to change the world. But as the journey went on, the heat rose along with the cost of discipleship. Trials and disappointment seared their skin. Persecution and rejection rattled their bones. For many, the cost of following Christ became too great.

At first they sang, "We'll follow the Lamb wherever He leads!" But soon fear and doubt crept in. "Why does it hurt so much?" some cried. "Why have we lost so many friends and loved ones along the way? We're serving God at all cost, and all we get is the short end of the stick."

The train stopped at a city called Comfort, Compromise and Convenience. A crowd stumbled off, gasping, "This isn't what we signed up for! Where's the prosperity and blessing? Where's the easy victory?"

The Divine Conductor stepped down. His voice was gentle but unyielding. *"You say you love Me, but you run from My purifying fire. Don't you know I am an all-consuming fire?"*

To know Me is to burn with My zeal and passion. To follow Me is to deny yourself and pick up your cross."

Then He turned to the passengers who remained. Their faces were weary and their hands were tired, but their eyes were fixed on Him. *"You are the ones I've written in My scroll of remembrance,"* He said. *"You are My treasured possession."*

Some who had left glanced back, weighed down by shame. A few crawled back on board, whispering, "We'll choose the Refiner's fire over the temporary pleasures of this world." Others hardened their hearts and went chasing shadows of safety and worldly dreams.

Inside the train, the faithful huddled together, bandaging one another's wounds. "Remember the early church?" one said. "They shared everything, even their tears." The flames melted their pride, their greed and their fear of man, until only raw, desperate love for Jesus remained. "Don't quit now," they urged one another. "The pain is purifying us!"

When the train reached the edge of heaven, the Divine Conductor flung open the doors. Light exploded, and in that place every tear and every sacrifice finally made sense.

"Welcome home," He said. *"You didn't just ride the Refiner's Fire. You endured it, and it became a fire of passion within you. My fire was never here to punish you. It was here to consume and purify you, to make you dangerous to the kingdom of darkness."*

Stay on the train

Too many of us want a Jesus who heals our wounds without asking us to pick up our cross. We want revival without repentance, power without persecution, and a crown without a cross.

But "fire tests the purity of silver and gold, but the LORD tests the heart" (Proverbs 17:3). Every season in this book is a stretch of track on that train. Some stretches are beautiful. Some are blazing hot. All of them are headed home.

There is a reason for your season.

Stay on the train. Keep your lamp burning. And bring someone with you.

The Season of Repentance

Keep Your Lamp Burning

Friend, wherever you are right now, and whatever you've done, I'm glad you're here. Can I ask you something gently? Do you believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God? That He loved you enough to die for your sin, not just the world's, but yours? And that God raised Him up out of that grave?

If something in you is saying yes, then He's already drawing you. Repentance isn't Him pushing you away. It's Him calling you home. It means turning from the sin that's been hurting you, receiving the forgiveness He's freely holding out, and trusting Him enough to let Him be Lord of your life.

I won't lie to you. Following Jesus is going to cost you. It may cost you comfort. It may cost you the approval of people you care about. It will definitely cost you control. And I can't promise you it won't cost you your life. In China, India, and across the Middle East, believers are losing their freedom, their families, and even their lives for the name of Jesus, and that's well known. But He is worth it all. Knowing Him is the pearl of great price, the one thing worth selling everything else to have. Once you put your hand to the plow, you don't look back. So can you trust Him with your whole life, even when obeying Him hurts?

Here's the good news: you don't have to have it all figured out, and you don't have to be strong enough. You're not. None of us are. Just come honest. Bring Him your sin, your questions, your weakness, all of it. Salvation is His gift, not your achievement. Your part is to receive Him by faith and start walking with Him.

That's where the oil begins. Don't let your lamp go out.