

A dramatic landscape scene. In the foreground, an open book with a leather strap lies on a stone wall. A path of stone leads from the bottom center towards a church on a hill. A group of people in period clothing are walking along the path. To the left, there are ruins of stone walls. In the background, there are mountains, a waterfall, and a river. The sky is filled with dark clouds, but bright sunbeams break through from the right side, illuminating the church and the path. The overall tone is hopeful and inspiring.

A RETURN TO THE ANCIENT PATH

MAKE THE CHURCH
GREAT AGAIN

The Boy Who Pushes the Plow

CHRONICLES OF A REFORMER

A Return to the Ancient Path

Make the Church Great Again

THE BOY WHO PUSHES THE PLOW

CHRONICLES OF A REFORMER

*"I will cause a boy who drives the plow to know more of the
Scriptures than you do."
— William Tyndale*

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation (NLT). Other versions are marked where used.

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

Chronicles of a Reformer is a series written alongside *The 9 Seasons of the Kingdom of God*: Refinement, Repentance, Revival, Reformation, Recalculate, Revolution, Release, Reward and Repeat.

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INTRODUCTION

The Plowboy on the Old Road

Some of you will rebuild the deserted ruins of your cities. Then you will be known as a rebuilders of walls and a restorer of homes.

Isaiah 58:12

William Tyndale once told a learned churchman, “If God spare my life, ere many years pass, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.” He spent his life putting the Bible into the hands of ordinary people, and it cost him that life.

That’s where the name on this cover comes from. I write as the boy who pushes the plow. I keep my name and face off these pages so you’ll follow the One I’m following, not me.

A plow doesn’t build anything new. It breaks up hard ground so seed can go back into soil that was made to receive it. That’s what I believe God is doing in His Church right now. He isn’t inventing a new Church. He’s breaking up the hard ground so the old seed can grow again.

God isn’t building a new Church. He’s restoring the one He already paid for.

Why This Book

For years I’ve watched sincere believers and leaders work harder and harder to hold something together that keeps cracking. More programs.

Better production. Bigger brands. And underneath it all, a quiet ache: Is this really what Jesus had in mind?

I don't think it is. I think we've drifted from the ancient path, and God is calling us back.

This book is not a critique from the outside. I love the Church. She's the Bride of Christ, and I'm part of her. Everything I write here, I write to myself first. Some of these chapters were written on my knees, and some of them were written after God corrected me.

About the Subtitle

I want to say this plainly, because it matters.

The phrase "make the Church great again" came to me in prayer. I don't consider myself patriotic by any means, and this book has nothing to do with any nation, political party or campaign. It has everything to do with the Bride of Christ.

The Church was great at the beginning, not because of her size or influence but because she was a family filled with the Holy Spirit, devoted to the Word, sharing her tables and her lives, and carrying the presence of God into a hostile world. Making the Church great again means only one thing in these pages: returning to what made her great in the first place.

Before We Try to Change Babylon

I am not particularly interested in politics. But I do believe God has called me to be a prophetic voice, and that conviction carries a responsibility to speak biblical truth even when it challenges what people have grown comfortable with.

When I speak about making the Church great again, I am talking about returning her to faithfulness: a people who know their God, obey His Word, carry His presence, and reflect His character.

Jeremiah's calling gives us a sobering picture of what that kind of responsibility can involve:

4 Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying,

5 Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.

6 Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.

7 But the LORD said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak.

8 Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD.

9 Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth.

10 See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.

Jeremiah 1:4–10, KJV

Those words were spoken to Jeremiah concerning his particular assignment. But look at the pattern: before building and planting, there was uprooting and tearing down. Some things had taken root that could not remain if God's people were going to walk faithfully with Him.

A prophetic voice is not called to always coddle. There are times to comfort the wounded, and there are times to challenge the comfortable. Biblical truth cuts to the heart. It exposes our motives, confronts our loyalties, and unveils which kingdom we have actually been serving.

That examination includes me. Believing I have a prophetic assignment does not place my words above correction. It makes me responsible to submit them to Scripture and to receive the same examination I am asking others to embrace.

The Word must search the heart of the messenger as surely as it searches the heart of the hearer.

My concern is that many American Christians have become more consumed with trying to redeem a Babylonian culture than with stewarding the culture of the Church with excellence. We are deeply concerned about who governs the nation. Are we equally concerned about who governs our hearts, our homes, and our congregations?

That is the folly of getting the cart before the horse: trying to reform the culture around us while neglecting the reformation God is calling for within us. We are asking the world to follow a truth we have not faithfully put into practice in our own house.

By Babylon, I mean a culture organized around pride, power, appetite, and independence from God. Those influences do not stop at the church doors. We can condemn them in the world while rewarding them in our own leaders, platforms, and ambitions.

We want integrity in public office. Do we require it behind the pulpit? We want the next generation to embrace truth. Are we discipling them to know and obey it? We grieve the breakdown of

family in society. Are our churches becoming families where people are known, corrected, protected, and loved?

Christians have responsibilities in the world around us. We should care about justice, serve our neighbors, and bring truth into public life. But that responsibility does not excuse neglecting the people and relationships God has already entrusted to us.

We cannot faithfully call a culture to repentance while protecting the same compromise in the Church.

That is the burden behind these pages. I love the Church, and I want to see her become faithful in the things she asks the world to take seriously. I want our holiness to reach beyond our language, our discipleship beyond our programs, and our love beyond what we say from a platform.

The purpose of uprooting is to make room for something worth planting. The purpose of correction is restoration. If we tear down and never build, we have left the work unfinished.

So before we ask how to change Babylon, we must be willing to ask how much of Babylon we have allowed to shape us. Then we must let God deal with what He reveals and faithfully steward the house He has entrusted to our care.

The Season of Recalculation

If you've read the other Chronicles of a Reformer, you know I teach nine seasons of the Kingdom of God: Refinement, Repentance, Revival, Reformation, Recalculate, Revolution, Release, Reward and Repeat. This book is about Recalculate.

When we miss a turn, God doesn't abandon us on the wrong road. Like a GPS, He recalculates. He reassesses where we are and calls us to reapply the reformation He already gave us. Recalculation isn't always necessary, but it's often unavoidable, because all of us carry an orphan tendency to lower our theology to match our pain.

What You'll Find Here

Part One, Cracks in the Foundation,
asks why the Church must return. We'll look at the cracks in the walls, the ark and the Titanic, and the missing watchmen.

Part Two, Idols in the House,
names what took the place of the Father's presence: a true God in a false image, another Jesus and another gospel, the religion business, the kingdom of Saul, and the spirit of competition.

Part Three, The Prodigal Bride,
shows how the Bride comes home: the lies she believed about God, the Father who was there all along, the letters Jesus wrote to seven churches, the reformers and retainers He uses to rebuild, and the kind of person He chooses.

Part Four, The Ancient Paths,
walks the old road again: the ancient wells of the Spirit, the gospel of the Kingdom, and the family table.

How to Read This Book

Read it with others. The ancient path was never walked alone. In the days of Malachi, when God's people were weary and cynical, those who feared the Lord began talking with one another, and the Lord leaned in to listen (Malachi 3:16).

Each chapter ends with a section called

For the Road

: three questions and one line to carry with you. Talk about them at a table. Pray about them. Let them change how you do church, not just how you think about it.

As always, eat the chicken and throw away the bone. Test everything here against the Word of God.

The old road is still there. Let's walk it together.

The way forward for the Church is the way back.

DO WE KNOW THE GOSPEL?



What if one of the biggest reasons cultural Christianity dominates America over biblical Christianity is that we don't know what the Gospel is?

BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW

4%
of Americans

12%
of evangelical
believers

37%
of pastors

hold a biblical worldview.

51% of Christians don't know what the Great Commission is.

47% of Millennials think evangelism is wrong.

1% of pastors think they are doing discipleship well.

8% of churches believe that their church is doing discipleship well.

11% of Americans read the Bible daily.

17% say they meet with a spiritual mentor as part of their discipleship efforts.

64% of 18-29-year-olds who grew up in church say they have withdrawn from church involvement as adults after having been active as children or teens.

— BARNA GROUP —



PART ONE

Cracks in the Foundation

Why must the Church return?

CHAPTER 1

When the Foundations Shift

The foundations of law and order have collapsed. What can the righteous do?

Psalm 11:3

A while ago, a crack appeared in the wall of one of the bedrooms in our home.

We called in a professional. He patched the plaster, repainted the wall, and it looked brand new. Not long after, the crack came back. We called him again. He patched it and repainted it again. Everything looked fine for a couple of months, and then the crack returned. This time it brought its aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews.

So we called a different professional, and he gave us the verdict. The cracks in the wall were a symptom of a much deeper problem. Our foundation was shifting. He told us that until we stabilized the foundation, we would be repairing cracks in the walls forever.

I couldn't think of a better picture of the condition of the Church in our day.

We keep calling the painters. A new series. A better stage. A fresher brand. A bigger campus. And every few months the cracks come back with their relatives: burned-out leaders, moral failures, empty young adults, people who attend for years and never become disciples. We patch and paint, and we wonder why it never holds.

You can't fix a foundation problem with a paintbrush.

The Ancient Paths

Six hundred years before Christ, the prophet Jeremiah stood at a crossroads in the history of God's people and delivered one of the most tender and most heartbreaking invitations in the Bible.

This is what the LORD says: "Stop at the crossroads and look around. Ask for the old, godly way, and walk in it. Travel its path, and you will find rest for your souls. But you reply, 'No, that's not the road we want!' I posted watchmen over you who said, 'Listen for the sound of the alarm.' But you replied, 'No! We won't pay attention!'"

Jeremiah 6:16-17

Older translations call it "the ancient paths." God didn't offer His people a new strategy. He offered them an old road. And He attached a promise to it: rest for your souls.

Then comes the saddest line in the passage. "No, that's not the road we want."

I believe the Church is standing at that same crossroads. We want revival, but we want it on our road. We want our righteous beliefs without righteous actions. We want to sow carnal seeds and somehow not reap a carnal harvest. And so the cracks keep coming back.

Notice that God doesn't say, "Build a new path." He says, "Ask for the old one." The foundation was laid a long time ago. "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). The Church doesn't need a new foundation. It needs to go back and build on the one it drifted away from.

God isn't calling us to a new road. He's calling us back to an old one.

The Tree That Looked Healthy

One day I walked outside and saw that the big tree in front of our house had split down the middle. I heard the Lord say, "Pay attention, and learn from this."

When I talked with our landscaper, he told me the tree had been diseased and dying on the inside for a long time. You would have had to look very closely to notice, because from the outside its leaves were green and it looked perfectly healthy. In the end, the weight of its own branches and leaves split it in two.

The tree looked good on the outside while it was dying on the inside.

That's one of the hardest conditions to heal, because it's hard to ask for help when you look successful. The tree could have been saved. An arborist could have diagnosed the disease, pruned the branches and treated it. But to survive, it would have needed to be stripped and bare for a season.

I see in that tree a picture of many ministries, and many of us. We need trusted voices who can diagnose what's happening on the inside, not just admire the leaves. And we need the courage to let God strip us for a season, which means dying to the need to always look successful in the eyes of people.

The leaves can look healthy while the heart of the tree is dying.

A Divine Winter

Around the same season, I noticed something strange about the weather. We were headed toward the middle of December, and many of the trees

still hadn't let go of their leaves. I couldn't remember a time when trees held onto their leaves so long.

The Lord began to show me that what was happening in the natural was a reflection of what was happening in the spirit. Many people are holding on to things in this season that they're required to let go of. Some are misdiagnosing a divine winter as divine judgment. And if we can't change the way we see a season, we can't embrace what God is doing when He brings divine change.

Trees know how to let go. They know when it's time to stop sending resources to what needs to die so that new life can come in the spring.

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."

1 Samuel 16:1

The Sauls in our lives are people, things and activities that once served a divine purpose but have now become a dangerous distraction. Some of the ways we do church once served God's purpose. That doesn't mean they still do. What God has for us is bigger than anything we're clinging to, but we have to be willing to open our hands.

Trees know when to let go. The question is whether we do.

What I Mean by "Make the Church Great Again"

I need to be clear about the subtitle of this book.

I don't consider myself patriotic by any means, so I was surprised when the Lord spoke this phrase to me in prayer: "I'm going to teach you how to make the Church great again." I'm not writing about a nation, a political party, or a movement of any kind on this earth. I'm writing about the Bride of Christ.

The Church has never been great because of her buildings, budgets or influence. She was great at the beginning because she was a family filled with the Holy Spirit, devoted to the apostles' teaching, sharing her life and her tables, and so full of the presence of God that "a deep sense of awe came over them all" (Acts 2:43). Making the Church great again simply means returning to what made her great in the first place.

That's the ancient path.

Three Reformations

I believe there have been two great reformations since the birth of the Acts 2 Church, and we're standing on the edge of a third.

1. **1517, the Word Reformation.** Its leading voice was Martin Luther, and its focus was Jesus. It was a reformation of ideology, bringing the Scriptures and salvation by grace through faith back to ordinary people. Its verse: "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).
2. **1906, the Power Reformation.** Its leading voice was William Seymour, in a humble building on Azusa Street, and its focus was the Holy Spirit. It was a reformation of authority, restoring the power of the Spirit to ordinary believers. Its verse: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8).
3. **Now, the Love Reformation.** Its leaders will be faceless men and women. Its focus is the Father. It is a reformation of family. Its verse: "We love each other because he loved us first" (1 John 4:19).

The first reformation gave the Church back her Bible. The second gave her back her power. The third will give her back her family.

Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the LORD arrives. His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers.

Malachi 4:5-6

That last reformation won't have a famous face. It will look like fathers and mothers in the faith opening their homes and their lives. It will look like sons and daughters who know the Word, walk in the Spirit, and are secure in the Father's love. It will look a lot like Acts 2.

The Word Reformation restored the Book. The Power Reformation restored the Spirit. The Love Reformation will restore the family.

The Season of Recalculation

In the series of books I've been writing, I teach the nine seasons of the Kingdom of God: Refinement, Repentance, Revival, Reformation, Recalculate, Revolution, Release, Reward and Repeat. This book lives in the season of Recalculate.

You know what a GPS does when you miss a turn. It doesn't scold you. It says, "Recalculating," and it starts showing you the way back.

Recalculation isn't always necessary, but it is often unavoidable, because of the orphan tendency in all of us to lower our theology to match our pain. When we drift, God doesn't abandon us on the wrong road. He reassesses where we are, and He calls us to reapply the reformation He already gave us. He shows us the way back to the ancient paths.

That's what this book is about. We're going to look honestly at the cracks in the walls and trace them down to the foundation. We'll look at the idols that took the place of the Father's presence in His house. We'll look at the prodigal Bride and how she comes home. And we'll walk the

ancient paths again: the wells of the Spirit, the gospel of the Kingdom, and the family table.

The road back isn't new. It's been waiting for us the whole time. And at the end of it is the promise God made through Jeremiah: rest for your souls.

For the Road

1. Where have you been "repainting the walls" in your life or ministry instead of dealing with the foundation?
2. Is there a "Saul" you're still mourning; something that once served God's purpose but has become a distraction? What would it look like to open your hands?
3. Which of the three reformations (the Word, the Power, or the Love of the Father) do you most need to experience in your own life right now?

The Church doesn't need a new foundation. She needs to come home to the one she already has.

CHAPTER 2

The Ark or the Titanic

It was by faith that Noah built a large boat to save his family from the flood. He obeyed God, who warned him about things that had never happened before.

Hebrews 11:7

In June 2023, a small submersible called the Titan dove into the North Atlantic to carry a handful of passengers down to see the wreck of the Titanic. Less than two hours into the dive, it lost contact with the surface. For days the world watched the search. Then the news came: the deep-sea pressure had crushed the vessel, and everyone on board was gone.

As I watched that story unfold, the Lord reminded me of something He had spoken to me back in 2011, through the movie *Titanic*. He had shown me that there were a lot of similarities between that ship and the culture of the Church in our day.

More than a century after it sank, the Titanic was still taking lives. People were still paying a fortune to go down and look at it.

I believe that's a word for us. We are still fascinated with the unsinkable ship, even when it's lying on the ocean floor.

A Titanic of Self-Preservation

Many in the Body of Christ have built a Titanic of self-preservation instead of an ark of His presence.

The ark and the Titanic were both large boats. That's where the similarities end. The ark was built by a man who heard God and obeyed Him, to save his family. The Titanic was built to impress, and it was sold as an opportunity of a lifetime.

The Lord did not sink the Titanic. Pride sank her. Because they didn't think she could sink, they sailed boldly into dangerous waters with reckless abandon.

God warned Israel about this exact danger before they ever entered the Promised Land. When they had built fine homes and their flocks had multiplied, they were to be careful.

*He did all this so you would never say to yourself, "I have achieved this wealth with my own strength and energy."
Remember the LORD your God. He is the one who gives you power to be successful.*

Deuteronomy 8:17-18

Success is dangerous water. Seasons of making good money and having a successful ministry can be misread as God's approval of everything in our lives, and that misreading leads to carnal pride. We rarely search our hearts when all we've had is success. Pride comes before the fall because pride is the hardest enemy to see.

In the world you get promoted when you pass the test. In the Kingdom of God, the promotion is the test.

The fire we are called to build church culture around is the admiration and love of Jesus Christ, and of His children made in His image. When we build it around the love and admiration of entertainment, networking and influence, we have built a beautiful ship with no lifeboats.

Self-preservation isn't worth it if you can't live with the self you're preserving.

An Opportunity of a Lifetime

In the movie, the young hero wins his ticket on the Titanic in a poker game, and he calls it a very lucky hand. Everyone on the dock thought the passengers were the fortunate ones.

Do you think any of them would have boarded if they'd known the ship was going to sink?

That's the question behind every "opportunity of a lifetime." Opportunists are people who see a chance to gain an advantage, often at the expense of others and of their own integrity. An opportunist will sacrifice the great for the good and purpose for prosperity, because he's willing to lay his divine destiny on the altar for the praises of men and the riches of this world.

The Kingdom has a different way of walking.

The LORD directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives.

Psalm 37:23

Bill Johnson put it this way:

"The favor of God opens doors... most that you are not called to walk through."

Bill Johnson

There's an old story about a famous revivalist who finished preaching, and an old man walked to the front of the church to speak to him. "Finally," the old man said, "I have found a man that's not for sale."

So here is the question I've had to ask myself. Are my daily decisions based on eternity, or on opportunity and comfort?

The Living Room Sounded More Like Jesus

Years ago, when my wife and I decided to commit to planting a church in our home, we went to our pastor at the time and told him what God was calling us to do.

He resisted at first. He tried to talk me into the opportunity of a lifetime: the chance to reach millions of people through his ministry. “Do you really want to sacrifice that,” he asked me, “to talk to twenty people in a living room?”

I told him the living room sounded more like Jesus to me.

I also told him what the Lord had shown me: a crisis on the horizon, and a word that the current church model would not be able to operate in those times.

To my surprise, he agreed. He told me he knew the model the church was using was only temporary. But he wanted to take advantage of it for as long as he could.

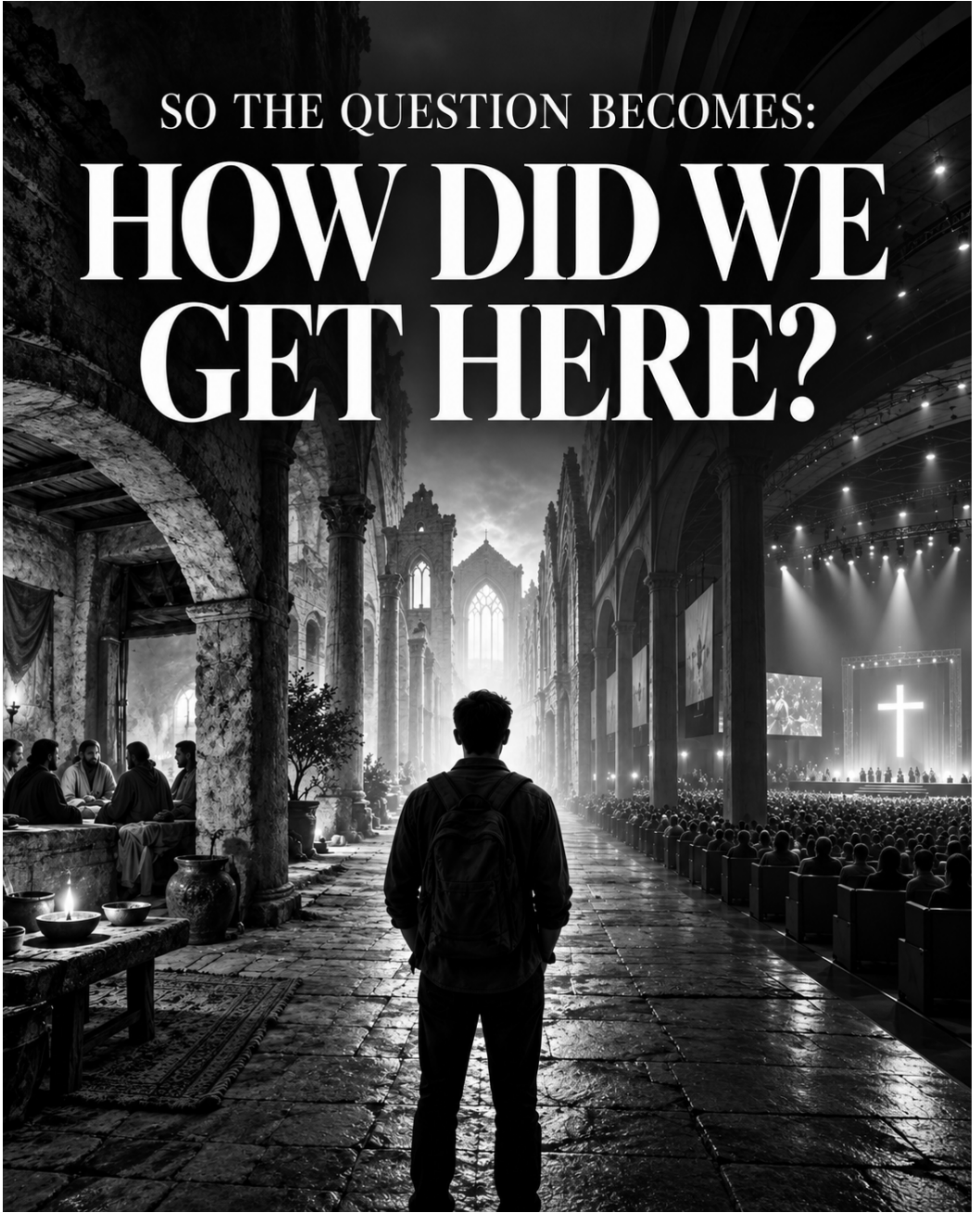
My first thought was, *Why aren't he and other pastors warning the Church about this?*

I don't tell that story to shame anyone. I tell it because that conversation has stayed with me for years. A sinking ship can still look like a great opportunity. You can know the iceberg is out there and still decide the view from the upper deck is too good to leave.

A sinking ship can still look like a great opportunity.

SO THE QUESTION BECOMES:

HOW DID WE GET HERE?



Why Didn't More People Get Off?

The Titanic set sail from Southampton on April 10, 1912, with more than 2,200 passengers and crew on board. Late on the night of April 14, she struck an iceberg, and in the early hours of April 15 she broke apart and sank, taking more than 1,500 lives with her.

Why didn't more people get off? I see four reasons, and each one is a mirror for the Church.

1. There weren't enough lifeboats.

The ship carried lifeboats for only about half of the people on board. The story often told is that the owners wanted fewer lifeboats on deck to give passengers unobstructed views and to give the ship a cleaner look from the outside.

When you build a franchise instead of a family, there's no one there when crisis strikes to remind you who God is and who you are in Him. Franchise churches have the aesthetic appeal of entertainment and the unobstructed view of relational independence, but they lack the strength of a family. Family can be messy and inconvenient, but a Kingdom family knows how to pray, and it rallies in a time of crisis.

People love the convenience of relational independence until they hit the iceberg called "I can't do this by myself anymore."

*Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other
succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help.
But someone who falls alone is in real trouble.*

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

2. There was no real training for an emergency.

Driven by performance and control, the Church hasn't sufficiently trained and equipped the saints in spiritual gifts and spiritual warfare for a time of crisis. The convenience of attendance has become more valued

than the ancient paths of training and covenant relationship. It's easier to entertain an audience than to train an army, because entertainment doesn't require participation or discipline. Spiritual gifts and spiritual warfare were never meant for "professional Christians." They're for every disciple.

Climbing down into a small open boat in the dark, leaving the warmth and luxury of the ship behind, didn't look like rescue to everyone. In the Church, bigger and better has replaced real and relational. When the church looks more like a social club for the elite and a theme park for entertainment than a hospital for the sick and a training center for disciples, brand and celebrity become more important than the cost of discipleship and the care of the brokenhearted.

I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies... Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living.

Amos 5:21, 24

When what we want out of church becomes more important than what God is looking for in His Church, revival tarries.

4. They didn't let the truth of their situation move them.

Many people on board refused to believe the unsinkable ship was going to the bottom of the sea. Sometimes the medicine we need most is a dose of reality: the honest admission that what we're doing isn't going to get us where God wants us to go. It takes no courage to keep going down the road of business as usual.

It takes no courage to stay on a sinking ship. It takes courage to climb into the lifeboat.

Five Church Models

Calling a gathering a "church" doesn't make it one. A crowd, a building or

a service may bear His name and still lack His presence, His authority and His transforming work. The label doesn't reveal what a church is. The fruit does.

I see five models of church in our day. The first four each hold a piece of the truth, but they trade the whole for comfort.

1. **The Entertainment Model.**

Church exists to keep people from being bored. Gifts and talents are elevated, and services are timed for convenience, even around the NFL kickoff. Picture a church where the lighting rig cost more than the missions budget, and the new worship leader was chosen for his stage presence and following instead of his character. A church that values entertainment over character will make actors instead of disciples. The way back is to measure a service by who was changed, not by how it felt.

2. **The Business Model.**

Church is run from the top down and driven by metrics, capital, numerical growth, branding and social footprint. Picture a staff meeting that starts every week with the dashboard (attendance, giving, new campuses, online reach) while no one has asked in months how the people are actually doing. Or a pastor who turns down a member's plea for counseling because "that doesn't scale," then spends weeks on a new logo. The way back is to count names, not numbers. "It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies" (Zechariah 4:6).

3. **The University Model.**

Church centers on teaching: education, Bible knowledge and theological discussion as the main goal. Picture a small group that has studied Romans verse by verse for three years. They can define every

word, but they've never prayed together or shared a meal. Knowledge is good, but the Pharisees knew the Scriptures better than anyone and still didn't recognize Jesus (John 5:39–40). The way back is to turn one thing you learned this week into one thing you obey this week.

4. **The Netflix Model.**

Church is consumed: three songs and a sermon, watched online from the comfort of home. Picture a man who hasn't been in a gathering in two years. He streams the sermon at 1.5x speed on Sunday afternoon, and no one at the church knows his name. You can watch a movie and feel close to an actor without ever knowing him. Disciples need to be known. The way back is to get off the couch and into a living room.

5. **The Family Model.**

This is the biblical model. Church is a household: love, shepherding, shared life, discipline, accountability and spiritual formation. Picture a young man who relapses, and that same night three men show up at his apartment, pray with him and set up a plan to check in every day. Picture a single mom who loses her job, and her church family covers her rent for three months while two families take turns watching her kids. That's what the first believers looked like when they "met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity" (Acts 2:46). The way back is to stay when it gets messy. Family is where you're known, loved, corrected and formed.

In *Cultivating a Prophetic Community* I wrote about the difference between a family and a franchise. Here's the question that difference puts to each of us. Which model does your church fit into most? And more personally: am I drawn to a church because it fits my spiritual palate, or because it's transforming me and preparing me for eternity?

The label doesn't reveal what a church is. The fruit does.

Recalculating

How do you know whether you're on the Titanic or in the ark? Here are five symptoms that tell you it's time to recalculate.

1. **You're looking for a position on the ship.** Pleasing people has become more important than fulfilling a divine destiny with God.
2. **You want what's new and popular.** You'd rather be part of something trendy than something biblical that walks the ancient paths.
3. **You're ignoring the signs.** The ship of the traditions of men is taking on water, and you keep telling yourself it's fine, while the ark of His presence goes by with burning hearts on board.
4. **You're put off by humble beginnings.** The lifeboat that will save you looks small, plain and uncomfortable. "Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin" (Zechariah 4:10).
5. **You've been seduced by luxury.** The comforts of franchise ministry have quietly replaced a fulfilling, loving relationship with Jesus Christ.

One question cuts through all five. Am I using people to gain personal pleasure and resources, or am I using my resources and sacrificing my pleasures for His eternal glory?

Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.

Matthew 6:21

Here's the good news. The ark is still being built, and the door is still open. Noah built a boat "to save his family." That's what God is doing in this hour. He is gathering a family into His presence, and there's still room on board.

I'm more concerned with the quality of my oil than the quality of my life. Eternity over empire. Faithfulness over fame. His glory over my legacy.

For the Road

1. Where have you mistaken success, or a “great opportunity,” for God’s approval?
2. Of the five church models, which one have you been most comfortable in? What would one step toward the family model look like for you this month?
3. Which of the five recalculation symptoms do you recognize in your own heart?

The Titanic was built to impress. The ark was built to save a family. Choose the ark.

CHAPTER 3

Where Are the Watchmen?

But if the watchman sees the enemy coming and doesn't sound the alarm to warn the people, he is responsible for their captivity.

Ezekiel 33:6

One morning in prayer, I heard the Lord ask me a question.

“Where are the watchmen?”

It wasn't a gentle question. It had grief in it. In Ezekiel's day, a watchman stood on the city wall and looked out at the horizon. “When the watchman sees the enemy coming, he sounds the alarm to warn the people” (Ezekiel 33:3). If the people ignored the alarm, that was on them. But if the watchman saw the enemy and stayed silent, God held the watchman responsible.

A good friend of mine uses the phrase “mental gymnastics” for the way people refuse to see the clear evidence of compromise and wickedness in our own camp. We'll twist ourselves into knots to avoid admitting what's right in front of us. That kind of spiritual laziness has produced a culture of “preyers” instead of watchmen.

A watchman prays with his eyes open. He sees the enemy in the midst of God's people, and he says so. When we pray with our eyes shut to what's happening inside our own walls, we don't stay pray-ers for long. We become prey.

A watchman prays with his eyes open.

If You're Allowing It, You're Coaching It

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

On a football field, that's obvious. If a player keeps missing his assignment and the coach says nothing, the coach has just taught the whole team that the assignment doesn't matter. Silence is a lesson. What you tolerate, you teach.

The same is true in the house of God. What we allow in our pulpits, our leadership teams, our small groups and our own hearts, we are coaching the next generation to accept.

*For the time has come for judgment, and it must begin with
God's household.*

1 Peter 4:17

In this hour of shaking, judgment starts in the house of the Lord. That's a mercy. God deals with His own house first so that His people can stand on solid ground when everything else is shaking.

The question in front of us is simple. Will we return to the ancient paths and take up the responsibility of the watchman? Or will we sit idle and let the Lord's house lie in ruins while we build our own man-made kingdoms?

*Why are you living in luxurious houses while my house lies in
ruins?*

Haggai 1:4

In the last chapter I told you about a pastor who knew the church model he was using was temporary but wanted to ride it as long as he could. My

first thought then is the same question I'm asking now. Who is going to warn the people?

What you tolerate, you teach.

Death by Idealism

Now I have to tell you about the other ditch, because I've been in it.

When I retired from the NFL, I suddenly had a lot more free time to pour into our home church community. And I started to struggle with people's commitment level. I could see where they needed to be. I couldn't understand why they weren't there yet.

Then God spoke to me. "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 word stopped me in my tracks. I thought I was being a watchman. In reality, a critical spirit was masquerading as the discerning of spirits.

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

Notice that God didn't tell me to lower the standard. Doing what is right still matters. But He put mercy and humility right next to it. A true watchman sounds the alarm, and he also stays on the wall with the people. An idealist sounds the alarm and walks away disappointed that nobody moved fast enough.

Picture a believer whose church has drifted. The prayer meeting is gone, and the Word has been replaced by motivational talks. One response is to lovingly call the church back to prayer and the Scriptures, even if it disrupts the culture. The other response looks almost right: leave, and

post online about everything that's wrong. The second one feels like courage, but idealism without honor for anyone's process tears down more than it builds.

Or picture a newer believer in your group who is growing slowly but steadily and still struggles in some areas. The idealist tells him he isn't serious enough about God. The father in the faith encourages him, honors his process and keeps walking with him.

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

**Truth without honor for someone's process becomes
idealism, and idealism kills.**

Jeremiah or Jonah?

There's a question I've had to sit with in this season, and I want to ask it of you too.

Jeremiah lived through a perfect storm. He was faithful. He was in the will of the Father. And the people around him were in rebellion and wouldn't receive a word he said.

*To whom can I give warning? Who will listen when I speak?
Their ears are closed, and they cannot hear. They scorn the word
of the LORD. They don't want to listen at all.*

Jeremiah 6:10

That's the same chapter where God offered His people the ancient paths and they said, "No, that's not the road we want." Jeremiah suffered through the collateral damage of other people's choices, of wicked leaders and a rebellious nation. The storm wasn't his fault. He was in it anyway.

Jonah's story is different. Jonah ran from God, and his disobedience put everyone on that boat in danger. The sailors were throwing cargo

overboard and crying out to their gods, while the one man who knew the true God was asleep below deck. When Jonah finally faced it, he told them the truth: “I know that this terrible storm is all my fault” (Jonah 1:12).

So here’s my question. What if the Church in this hour is a spiritual Jonah? What if it’s the sin of the Church, and not the sin of the world, that has us in this divine winter?

Do you feel more like Jeremiah or Jonah right now?

The answer matters. This is not the hour to misdiagnose where your heart truly is with the Lord. If you’re a Jeremiah, you need endurance. If you’re a Jonah, you need repentance. And it’s a dangerous thing to give yourself Jeremiah’s comfort when you need Jonah’s honesty.

When we confuse a divine winter with a divine delay, we start making accusations about the heart of God that don’t line up with His wisdom, power and character. Jesus warned that “sin will be rampant everywhere, and the love of many will grow cold” (Matthew 24:12). Panicking is not a strategy. Neither is burying your head in the sand. If there’s a real threat on the horizon, it’s time to prepare, not to be complacent.

This is not the hour to misdiagnose your own heart.

Calling Winter “Spring”

One of the ways we keep from facing a Jonah moment is by relabeling the season.

Picture a church where attendance has dropped by half in two years. The prayer meeting has closed, and no one has come to faith in a long time. The newsletter calls it “a season of pruning for greater growth.” Pruning is real, but it happens to a vine that is still bearing fruit. Calling barrenness “harvest” keeps a church from crying out for what it has lost. Jesus once came to a fig tree full of leaves and found no fruit on it (Mark

11:13). Winter isn't failure, but calling it spring keeps you from preparing for it.

*They offer superficial treatments for my people's mortal wound.
They give assurances of peace when there is no peace.*

Jeremiah 6:14

Peacekeepers and Peacemakers

That verse brings us to the last thing a watchman has to settle.

God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.

Matthew 5:9

What's the difference between a peacekeeper and a peacemaker?

- **A peacekeeper** mediates peace among people.
- **A peacemaker** mediates peace with a holy God.

Peacekeeping makes us vulnerable to humanism, because it centers on keeping unity and settling conflict from a human point of view. Its focus on pleasing people and finding a compromise can quietly put human values above spiritual truth. Picture a small group that values "keeping the peace" so much that nobody ever addresses sin. Everyone gets along, and nobody gets free.

Peacemakers are rooted in the fear of the Lord. They pursue peace on God's terms, and they care first about reconciliation with Him. They lean on the truth of Scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, not just on human wisdom.

Paul knew the difference. "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).

The false prophets of Jeremiah's day were peacekeepers. They said "peace" when there was no peace, and the people loved them for it. Jeremiah was a peacemaker. He told the truth so the people could be reconciled to God, and they hated him for it. But he was the one standing on the wall.

**Don't mistake peace with people for peace with a holy God.
What creates peace among people can make you an enemy of
God.**

What You Tolerate Will Dominate

Why Revival Tarries

Scripture: 1 Samuel 2:29; 3:10–14

A church can pray for revival while protecting the very things it needs to repent of.

Eli's household reveals that uncomfortable possibility. His sons dishonored God, and Eli confronted them verbally. But the Lord's indictment reached beyond what Eli had said to what he had allowed. He knew what was happening, yet he failed to restrain them.

God named the deeper issue: Eli honored his sons above Him.

That is where this story reaches into our own sanctuaries. When preserving a relationship becomes more important than obeying God, affection can become an idol. When a leader's usefulness excuses his conduct, the ministry begins protecting its machinery at the expense of its holiness.

And Eli benefited from the same offerings his sons dishonored. It is difficult to confront what helps keep our own table full.

We must ask whether our silence is truly patience—or whether we have simply become comfortable with what displeases God.

Returning to the ancient path requires more than recovering biblical language. It requires recovering biblical obedience. Correction must be humble, accountable, and aimed at restoration. Yet restoration cannot begin while wrongdoing is continually excused.

A watchman's responsibility does not end when the warning leaves his mouth. Those entrusted with authority must respond to the danger they recognize.

We cannot manufacture revival. We can, however, repent of the compromises we have learned to defend.

Before we ask God to fill His house with glory, we should ask whether we are willing to confront what dishonors Him inside it.

What have we called love that God is asking us to recognize as enabling?

The Wall Is Still Open

Here's the hope in all of this. God is still asking, "Where are the watchmen?" because He still intends to post them.

O Jerusalem, I have posted watchmen on your walls.

Isaiah 62:6

He's looking for sons and daughters who will pray with their eyes open, tell the truth with love, honor people's process, and stay on the wall until the morning comes. If you've been a Jonah, the way back starts with honesty. If you've been a Jeremiah, take heart: heaven sees your faithfulness even when no one listens.

Either way, there's a place on the wall with your name on it.

For the Road

1. What are you allowing, in your home, your ministry or your own heart, that you're quietly coaching others to accept?
2. Where have you been an idealist, holding a standard of truth without honoring someone's process?
3. In this season, do you feel more like Jeremiah or Jonah? What would honesty before God look like for you this week?

**A watchman prays with his eyes open, tells the truth with love,
and stays on the wall.**

Chapter 4

The Ezekiel 14 Meeting

A Dream from July 21, 2024

For God speaks again and again, though people do not recognize it. He speaks in dreams, in visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on people as they lie in their beds. He whispers in their ears and terrifies them with warnings. He makes them turn from doing wrong; he keeps them from pride.

Job 33:14–17

Directive Words and Prophetic Warnings

Not every word from God serves the same purpose. A directive word is a compass. It tells us what to do, gives clear instruction for the road ahead and orders our steps with divine wisdom. A prophetic warning is a watchman on the wall. It alerts us to the trials ahead and tells us why we must walk the path God has given, revealing the urgency of obedience before the storm arrives.

I believe the dream I had on July 21, 2024, carried both. It called me to immediate action and deep reflection. I understood it as a warning of testing and an invitation to repentance, with a faithful remnant ready to endure and help others prepare.

At the center of the dream was the message of Ezekiel 14: a call to repentance, a warning against idolatry of the heart, and a reminder that each of us is personally responsible before God. It calls us to

shed complacency and apathy and to embrace the transforming power of God's grace and truth.

The dream also pointed to Psalm 2, where the kings of the earth plot together against the Lord and His Anointed. It was a warning about global schemes against the God of Scripture and His truth, and at the same time a reminder of His unchallenged sovereignty. Every human plan against the eternal King, Jesus Christ, will fail.

A directive word tells you what to do. A prophetic warning tells you why it cannot wait.

The Dream

I was heading to the home of an old childhood friend named Jacoby. When I arrived, the police were already there, breaking up a party. I was with my friends, and we decided not to go in so we could stay clear of trouble. Oddly enough, we had all arrived on a single motorcycle, three of us somehow squeezed onto one bike.

I spotted another childhood friend, Brandon, and told him it might not be wise for us to keep riding the motorcycle, since riding three on one bike was illegal. He suggested I simply walk to his house. It was on the same street where I grew up, just three houses down from Jacoby's.

To my surprise, Brandon's house was under construction, and it had become a three-story building. I went inside and tried to find his father, because I thought I heard his voice. When I asked some people inside for directions, they asked whether I was there for "the Ezekiel 14 meeting."

My eyes widened. I felt the weight of those words immediately and knew this was a dream from the Lord. A man began to tell me about

the reality of a one world order, and I felt a strong urge to prepare by reading all of Ezekiel 14.

What follows is how I understand each part of the dream, in the order it unfolded. Eat the chicken and throw away the bone, and test everything by the Word of God.

Jacoby: Jacob's Trouble and the Refiner's Fire

The name Jacoby comes from Jacob, and the moment I woke, it brought to mind the phrase "the time of Jacob's trouble."

In all history, there has never been such a time of terror. It will be a time of trouble for my people Israel, but in the end, they will be saved.

Jeremiah 30:7

The name led me to reflect on a season of shaking that tests our convictions. I understood this part of the dream as a call to receive the Refiner's Fire with humility rather than assume that hardship means God has rejected us.

In that climate, the wise will stand firm and become guiding lights against a backdrop of deception and moral decline. This part of the dream speaks of a reckoning that confronts complacency and rebellion while refining those who hold fast to the true faith. It is an opportunity for repentance, revival and reformation, and it will test our endurance and commitment.

The Police: A Sign of God's Judgment

The police breaking up the party reminded me of the day Moses came down the mountain and ended Israel's celebration around the golden calf (Exodus 32). In the dream, being late to the party and hesitating to go in worked in my favor. Caution can make you miss out, but it can also save you from collateral damage.

God responds to rampant immorality and injustice, and He holds shepherds especially accountable for the condition of His flock.

Yet even His judgment carries a promise for the remnant: "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture" (Jeremiah 23:3, NIV).

The Motorcycle: Power, Anointing and Borrowed Oil

I see in the motorcycle a picture of power and anointing. Three of us riding on one bike, which was illegal, pictures a kind of unity that has no room for individual responsibility, where people ride on someone else's revelation and someone else's power in the Spirit.

Getting off the motorcycle and walking to Brandon's house represents personal responsibility: each of us seeking wisdom and the courage to endure for ourselves in a season of persecution. In this hour, love that suffers long will matter more than power and anointing. Our focus on power must give way to intimacy and a love for His presence.

Brandon: The Brave Remnant

The name Brandon brought to mind the word brave : ready to face and endure danger or pain, like a brave soldier. In the dream, he pictures a courageous company of God's people who are ready to endure conflict and the pain of persecution, like the believers in Philadelphia and Pergamum who held fast to His name through hardship (Revelation 2:13; 3:8–10).

The Three-Story House: The Church

I see Brandon's three-story house as a picture of the Church. Jesus said, "My house will be called a house of prayer" (Matthew 21:13, NIV). God told Noah to build the ark with "lower, second, and third stories" (Genesis 6:16, KJV), and the Church is the ark of this generation.

The construction shows that the building is not finished. God is still at work, and growth requires our participation. The house also confronts our priorities, as Haggai confronted the people of his day:

This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: The people are saying, "The time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD." Then the LORD sent this message through the prophet Haggai: "Why are you living in luxurious houses while my house lies in ruins? This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: Look at what's happening to you! You have planted much but harvest little. You eat but are not satisfied. You drink but are still thirsty. You put on clothes but cannot keep warm. Your wages disappear as though you were putting them in pockets filled with holes!"

Haggai 1:2–6

The party at Jacoby's house and the construction at Brandon's house stand in contrast: a church built around entertainment versus a church built around encounter. The first asks nothing of us. The second requires active participation and personal responsibility. Jesus is restoring His Church on the rock of revelation, sons and daughters who can hear the Father's voice for themselves.

The third story also speaks to me of a heavenly perspective. John heard a voice like a trumpet say, "Come up here, and I will show you what must happen after this" (Revelation 4:1). The season calls us to seek first the Kingdom (Matthew 6:33), to see from heaven's vantage point and to eliminate distractions.

Brandon's Father: Listening for the Father's Voice

In the dream, I thought I heard Brandon's father and went looking for him. I believe this pictures the Father's voice and our need to seek Him above everything else.

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

John 10:27 (NIV)

The Ezekiel 14 Meeting

Only a handful of people were gathered for the Ezekiel 14 meeting. I believe that detail shows how hard it is for prophetic warnings to be received. Only a few truly grasp how serious spiritual complacency and idolatry have become in the Church. Just as Noah received a warning before the rain, Ezekiel's message is a warning of judgment coming to those who stay unrepentant. It is a call to return to sincere devotion, remove whatever hinders wholehearted worship and obedience, and give ourselves to building His Church, His ark.

Then some of the leaders of Israel visited me, and while they were sitting with me, this message came to me from the LORD: "Son of man, these leaders have set up idols in their hearts. They have embraced things that will make them fall into sin. Why should I listen to their requests? Tell them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: The people of Israel have set up idols in their hearts and fallen into sin, and then they go to a prophet asking for a message. So I, the LORD, will give them the kind of answer their great idolatry deserves. I will do this to capture the minds and hearts of all my people who have turned from me to worship their detestable idols.' Therefore, tell the people of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Repent and turn away from your idols, and stop all your detestable sins.'"

Ezekiel 14:1-6

Ezekiel 14 was spoken to the elders of Israel, and I believe it speaks today to the shepherds of the Church and to every believer. It unfolds in five movements.

1. Idols in the heart (verses 1–5). The elders came to inquire of the Lord, but God exposed the idols they had set up in their hearts and the stumbling blocks they had placed before the people. He promised to answer them “according to their idols.” In other words, God would respond in a way that matched their idolatrous hearts, letting them reap what they had sown. The consequences would expose their sin and call them back to Him. This reveals His justice, His full awareness of their true condition and His desire to restore relationship.

2. The call to repentance (verses 6–8). God calls His people to repent and turn from their idols. This is not worldly sorrow, the remorse of getting caught and facing consequences. It is godly sorrow, a heart broken over having wounded the heart of God. Three times in his book, Ezekiel calls Israel to repent (Ezekiel 14:6; 18:30; 33:11). Sometimes God allows Egypt or Babylon to enslave His people in order to get Egypt and Babylon out of them.

3. Judgment on persistent idolaters (verses 9–11). God warns that a prophet who gives a message to idolaters, and the one who seeks it, will both bear the consequences. His purpose is to keep His people from straying, so that they will be His people and He will be their God.

4. Personal righteousness and judgment (verses 12–20). God describes a land that sins against Him through persistent unfaithfulness. Even if Noah, Daniel and Job lived there, their righteousness would save only themselves. Like Goshen in the days of the plagues (Exodus 8:22), God can protect His own in the middle of judgment, but each person must answer for their own heart.

5. Four severe judgments (verses 21–23). God names four judgments against Jerusalem: the sword, famine, wild beasts and

plague. In our day I believe they can picture war, food shortages, the violence and disorder of lawlessness, including demonic disruption, and epidemics. Revelation describes the same four in the ride of the pale horse, given authority “to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence, and by wild beasts of the earth” (Revelation 6:8, ESV). Yet God promised that survivors would come out, and those who saw their conduct would understand that His judgments were just.

Now this is what the Sovereign LORD says: How terrible it will be when all four of these dreadful punishments fall upon Jerusalem—war, famine, wild animals, and disease—destroying all her people and animals.

Ezekiel 14:21

In summary, Ezekiel 14 confronts idolatry among the shepherds, calls for repentance, stresses personal responsibility and declares the righteousness of God’s judgments. It calls us to a genuine relationship with God, free from corruption, selfish ambition and idolatry.

The One World Order: A Psalm 2 Crisis

The man’s talk of a one world order made me think of Psalm 2.

Why are the nations so angry? Why do they waste their time with futile plans? The kings of the earth prepare for battle; the rulers plot together against the LORD and against his anointed one. “Let us break their chains,” they cry, “and free ourselves from slavery to God.” But the one who rules in heaven laughs. The Lord scoffs at them.

Psalm 2:1–4

The nations scheme against the one true God and the unchanging truth of His Word. Yet this part of the dream was also a vivid reminder of God's unchallenged sovereignty, power and wisdom. He laughs at the futile plans of humanity, because He has already anointed His Son, Jesus Christ, as eternal King and Savior, the Lamb chosen before the creation of the world. Psalm 2 ends with a warning to the rulers of the earth to submit to the Son before His anger flares (Psalm 2:10–12).

Our response is not fear but trust.

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.

Psalm 20:7 (ESV)

Habakkuk shows us how to pray in such a time:

O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.

Habakkuk 3:2 (ESV)

Faithful in Babylon

When Judah was carried into exile, Jeremiah wrote a letter to the captives. It is a word for every believer who must stay faithful in a hostile culture.

This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: "Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare."

Jeremiah 29:4-7

In the same letter, God warned the exiles not to be fooled by prophets and dreamers who were telling lies in His name (Jeremiah 29:8-9). He exposed two of those false prophets, Ahab and Zedekiah, for their adultery and their lies, and He promised judgment on those who refused to listen (vv. 21-23).

The Number Three

As I reflected on the dream alongside Scripture, I noticed five associations involving the number three. I offer these as personal reflections to weigh, not as a fixed code for interpreting every dream:

1. Three riders on one motorcycle. The threefold cord that is not quickly broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12), and the fellowship of Father, Son and Spirit.
2. Three houses down the street. A journey of preparation, like the three days Israel consecrated themselves before the Lord came down on Sinai (Exodus 19:11), and the timing of God, who raised Jesus on the third day.

3. A three-story house. The triune God, the three stories of Noah's ark, and the three stages of salvation: justification, sanctification and glorification.

4. Three righteous men. Noah, Daniel and Job, whose righteousness could not turn aside judgment on the land but preserved their own souls (Ezekiel 14:14).

5. Three calls to repentance. Ezekiel's repeated plea for Israel to repent (Ezekiel 14:6; 18:30–32; 33:11), revealing God's patience and the need for a response.

For me, these associations brought together the call to holiness and God's grace to sustain those who respond. The emphasis remained repentance and personal responsibility, rather than the numbers themselves.

The Rise and Endurance of the Remnant

The dream ends with a warning, but God's last word is never fear. Malachi describes the remnant He is raising up in a day of compromise:

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the LORD listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and always thought about the honor of his name. "They will be my people," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. "On the day when I act in judgment, they will be my own special treasure. I will spare them as a father spares an obedient child. Then you will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not."

Malachi 3:16–18

To that remnant God still says what He said to Abram: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward” (Genesis 15:1, NIV). And Jesus adds a blessing for the season of shaking: “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me” (Matthew 11:6, NIV).

For the Road

1. Is the crushing season an old friend or a distant stranger to you, and how are you responding to the refiner’s fire?
2. Where have you been riding on someone else’s oil, revelation or anointing instead of seeking God for yourself?
3. What idols has Ezekiel 14 exposed in your heart, and what would godly sorrow look like in response?

Buy your own oil while there is still time.

PART TWO

Idols in the House

What took the place of the Father's presence?

Chapter 5

The True God in a False Image

*You thought that I was altogether like you; but I will rebuke you,
and set them in order before your eyes.*

Psalm 50:21 (NKJV)

Years ago I was walking down a school hallway where the Ten Commandments hung framed on the wall. I stopped and read them, and something about them disturbed me.

It wasn't that I disagreed with them. It was that I realized I didn't know the difference between the first commandment and the second. I had grown up in church. I could have recited them. But if you had asked me why God gave two separate commandments about worship, I couldn't have told you.

That question has stayed with me ever since, because I believe the answer is one of the most urgent messages for the Church in our day.

You've heard people ask, "Do you believe in God?" as if that settles everything. I don't believe the great sin of the last days will be refusing to believe in God. I believe it will be believing in a God shaped in man's image.

**The great temptation of the last days is to keep God's name
and change His face.**

What Is Truth?

On the night before the cross, Jesus stood before the Roman governor.

Pilate said, "So you are a king?" Jesus responded, "You say I am a king. Actually, I was born and came into the world to testify to the truth. All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true." "What is truth?" Pilate asked.

John 18:37-38

Pilate's question is the question of this hour. I believe the biggest source of division in the Church in the last days will be that age-old question, because the anthem of the spirit of lawlessness is "Do as you please." When hearts grow cold toward a holy God, self-will is the only prescription the fallen heart will accept.

Look closely at that scene and you'll see five things.

1. **The religious leaders brought Him there.** Pilate questioned Jesus about being "King of the Jews," but it was the Pharisees, afraid of losing influence and power, who delivered Him over.
2. **Truth isn't a social construct.** Jesus declared that truth is a divine, objective foundation. It doesn't bend to man's opinion or mold itself to human desire.
3. **The religious elite, not the secular authorities, played the key role in His crucifixion.** That should sober every one of us who sits in a pew or stands behind a pulpit.
4. **Jesus stated His purpose.** He came as King, to restore the Kingdom of God and to bear witness to the truth.
5. **Pilate's question exposes our tension.** "What is truth?" is still the conflict in the Body of Christ, between those who believe in the Spirit of Truth and those who believe truth is whatever we decide it is.

The deepest lawlessness is when created beings try to overthrow the Creator's rule by redefining reality on their own terms. We were made in God's image to reflect His nature, not to replace His authority. When we reshape truth to fit our limited understanding, our wounded desires or our selfish ambition, we aren't simply disagreeing with God. We're resisting His reign.

Servants of the living God don't refine the truth. We conform to it, by the blood of Jesus and the Spirit living in us.

Truth has a face, and His name is Jesus.

Whom You Worship and How You Worship

Here is the difference I couldn't see in that hallway.

You must not have any other god but me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them.

Exodus 20:3-5

The first commandment forbids worshiping a false god. The second commandment forbids worshiping the true God in a false image. The first has to do with *whom* you worship. The second has to do with *how* you worship.

The first commandment was already enough to rule out the gods of Egypt and Canaan. So why did God add the second? Because He knew His people. He knew we'd be tempted to keep His name and change His face. To make God a priority and still say, "I think God is like this," and then worship the God we imagined.

Only weeks after God spoke those words from the mountain, Israel did exactly that.

The Golden Calf Had God's Name on It

Moses was up on Mount Sinai with the Lord, and he was taking longer than the people expected. So they gathered around Aaron and said, "Make us gods who can lead us." Aaron collected their gold earrings and went to work.

Then Aaron took the gold, melted it down, and molded it into the shape of a calf. When the people saw it, they exclaimed, "O Israel, these are the gods who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" Aaron saw how excited the people were, so he built an altar in front of the calf. Then he announced, "Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!"

Exodus 32:4-5

Read that last line again. When the people first saw the calf, they used the general word for gods, *Elohim*. At that point you can't tell which god they mean. But then Aaron makes it clear. He proclaims a festival to "the LORD," and in Hebrew that's the covenant name, *Yahweh*, the name God gave Moses at the burning bush: "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14).

Aaron didn't introduce Israel to a new god. He took the gold they carried out of Egypt, shaped it like the bull-gods of Egypt, and called it by the name of the God who set them free. "Yahweh saved us from Egypt. Yahweh is our Lord. And here He is."

And at the very moment they were doing it, Moses was on top of the mountain with the real Yahweh.

There was a clue that this wasn't the God of the Scriptures. "After this, they celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in pagan revelry" (Exodus 32:6). The calf was a fertility symbol, and the worship looked like it. When you change the image of God, it isn't long before you change the way you live.

Israel kept God's name and put it on something they could control.

That is the true God in a false image. We still believe in God. We still sing to Jesus. We still call it church. But somewhere along the way, we started shaping Him to match our appetites, our wounds and our culture, and then we threw a festival in His name.

God made man in His own image, and we returned the favor. Paul described it plainly:

And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles.

Romans 1:23

Many people think believing in God or Jesus is enough. But Jesus said, "Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter" (Matthew 7:21). It's possible to say the right name over the wrong god. What saves us is believing in the true God and the true Jesus of the Scriptures.

**The God we make in our image will always agree with us.
That's how you know He isn't God.**

"This Is How I Sweep"

When I was a boy, I was sweeping the grass clippings off our front yard. My father watched me for a minute and then corrected my technique. "That's not how you sweep," he said.

I didn't want to be told what to do. So I answered him, "This is how I sweep."

The results were less than ideal. I got a spanking for that response, and I deserved it.

I laugh about it now, but I've come to see that the little boy with the broom is a picture of all of us before God. He gives us guidance, and we resist it. He shows us His way, and we answer, "This is how I sweep." This is how I worship. This is how I handle my money. This is how I date. This is how I lead. This is how I am, and God made me this way.

Since the Garden of Eden, man has been consumed with being the self-appointed authority over his own life. We want to do life our way. The old dictionary word for it is independence: "complete exemption from control, or the power of others." The serpent's first move was to plant a question, "Did God really say...?" (Genesis 3:1), and the question invited Adam and Eve to sit in judgment over what God had said.

Now look at Jesus. The only person who ever had the right to independence refused it.

So Jesus explained, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does."

John 5:19

The eternal Son of God lived in total dependence on His Father. If He wouldn't sweep His own way, why do we think we can?

Calling a blind spot your personality only keeps it hidden.

Have It Your Way

Jesus gave us a three-cord strand to live by:

Jesus told him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.”

John 14:6

My way. My truth. My life. Jesus said all three belong to Him.

But much of the Church has embraced what I call Burger King Christianity. “Have it your way.” Its creed is the same three words with a different owner: *our* way, *our* truth, *our* life. It sounds harmless, even friendly. But it’s the oldest lie in the Bible dressed in a paper crown.

I once read of a Peanuts cartoon where Charlie Brown is practicing archery in his backyard. Instead of aiming at the target, he shoots his arrow into the fence and then walks over and draws a target around wherever the arrow landed. When Lucy asks him why, he says, “This way I never miss.”

That is what happens when truth becomes subjective. We shoot first and draw the target afterward. Reality gets redrawn to justify our desires, protect our pride and dodge repentance. And the Bible has a sentence for that condition:

In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.

Judges 17:6

Here’s why the Bible draws so much fire in every generation. It has been carefully preserved through the centuries, and it carries one consistent message across dozens of writers. But most of the argument against it comes down to what it asks of us. The Bible demands moral objectivity, calls for personal accountability, and requires us to surrender our autonomy to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If we struggle with authority, we’ll struggle with the Book.

When the Word of God comes under man's scrutiny, we trade God's holy measuring stick for the broken scale of our own knowledge of good and evil. Then truth becomes subjective, and the old pattern repeats: everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

**If you draw the target after you shoot, you'll never miss,
and you'll never hit anything either.**

Coming Back to the Real God

Picture this. You're praying one morning, and the Holy Spirit gently shows you that something you've been calling "my process" or "the way I'm wired" is plain disobedience. You have a choice. You can remind God that everyone has their own process. You can promise Him you'll fix it yourself before you come back. Or you can simply say, "Father, I've been the author of my own morality."

The first answer keeps the calf. The second is still independence, just with better manners. Only the third brings you home.

Notice what happened at the foot of Sinai. God was angry, and He had every right to be. But Moses went back up the mountain and pleaded for the people, and God didn't abandon them. He gave them the commandments again, written on new tablets (Exodus 34:1). The God they had misrepresented came back to tell them the truth about Himself.

That is still who He is. The verse at the top of this chapter is a rebuke, and we need to hear it: "You thought that I was altogether like you." But hidden inside the rebuke is the best news in the world.

He isn't like us. He doesn't sulk, manipulate, flatter, or change His mind to keep the crowd happy. He doesn't need us to shape Him into something easier to love. He is better than the god we would have made. He is holy, and He is kind, and He is the same yesterday, today and forever.

So put down the broom and let your Father show you how to sweep. Melt down the calf. Ask Him to show you His face as it really is, in His Word and in His Son. Let go of the image, and you'll finally meet Him.

For the Road

1. In what area of your life have you been saying to God, "This is how I sweep"?
2. Where might you be worshiping the true God in a false image: keeping His name but shaping Him to match your preferences, your pain or your culture?
3. What would it look like this week to let God's Word, rather than your feelings, draw the target?

He isn't altogether like us, and that is the best news we'll ever hear.

Chapter 6

Another Jesus, Another Gospel

You happily put up with whatever anyone tells you, even if they preach a different Jesus than the one we preach, or a different kind of Spirit than the one you received, or a different kind of gospel than the one you believed.

2 Corinthians 11:4

What did Jesus warn His disciples about most concerning His second coming?

Most of us would guess wars, earthquakes, persecution, or the rise of the antichrist. Those are all in His answer. But they aren't the first thing He said. When the disciples asked Him about the signs of the end, Jesus opened with a warning:

He replied, "Don't let anyone mislead you, for many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and saying, 'The time has come!' But don't believe them."

Luke 21:8

Before He said a word about tribulation, He said, "Don't let anyone mislead you." Paul and Peter carried the same burden. Over and over they urged believers to examine themselves, guard against deception, and grow in their knowledge of Christ. I've come to believe that Jesus and the apostles gave more warnings about deception in the last days than about the Great Tribulation and persecution.

**Jesus' first warning about the end wasn't "Don't be afraid."
It was "Don't be deceived."**

Do We Truly Know Jesus?

In the last chapter we stood at the foot of Sinai and watched Israel build a golden calf and call it by God's name. That was the Old Testament version of the danger. This chapter is the New Testament version, and it is closer to home.

My biggest concern for the Church today is our lack of spiritual self-awareness. We may think we know who Jesus is when we actually know a cultural Jesus: a VeggieTales Jesus, or the Jesus portrayed on a television screen, without truly knowing the Jesus revealed in Scripture. A portrayal can stir your heart. But a portrayal is not a Person, and you can't follow a character all the way to the cross.

Paul saw how this happens in Romans 1:

Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools.

Romans 1:21-22

Notice the order. They knew God. Then they stopped worshiping Him as He is. Then they started making up ideas of what He was like. The result was darkness that felt like wisdom.

That is how the Jesus of the Scriptures gets replaced with a Jesus made in our image. The new Jesus is nice. He's safe. He's comfortable, acceptable and convenient. He never interrupts our plans, never confronts our sin, and never asks for our lives. He agrees with us about almost everything.

The Jesus of the Scriptures is different. When the apostle John, who had leaned on His chest at the Last Supper, saw Him glorified on the island of Patmos, he didn't give Him a hug. He fell at His feet as if he were dead (Revelation 1:17). Then that same Jesus laid His right hand on him and said, "Don't be afraid!" He is more terrifying and more tender than anything we could have invented.

**A Jesus who never disagrees with you is probably a Jesus
you made up.**

No Gospel at All

Paul was not gentle about this. To the churches in Galatia he wrote:

I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ. You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all.

Galatians 1:6-7

Then he said something that should make every preacher tremble: "Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you" (Galatians 1:8). Paul included himself. He included angels. No messenger, however impressive, has the right to edit the message.

And to the Corinthians he explained why counterfeit gospels work so well: "But I fear that somehow your pure and undivided devotion to Christ will be corrupted, just as Eve was deceived by the cunning ways of the serpent" (2 Corinthians 11:3). The serpent didn't tell Eve to stop believing in God. He just offered her a slightly different version of what God had said.

That's the question I want to put in front of you. Are you tolerating a gospel that heaven doesn't recognize?

A counterfeit gospel doesn't deny Jesus. It just offers you a slightly different one.

A Field Guide to Counterfeit Gospels

Bank tellers learn to spot counterfeit bills by studying the real thing, not by memorizing every fake. That's the goal here too. But it helps to know what the most common counterfeits look like, because each one is built on a real desire of the human heart. Here are eleven I see in the Church.

1. The prosperity gospel.

It grew out of the televangelism boom of the 1950s through the 1980s, with roots in the New Thought movement of the early twentieth century. It treats material blessing as the evidence of faith: "If you have enough faith, God will make you healthy, wealthy and successful." Its root is a desire for comfort, wealth and control. When blessing becomes the message, the gospel is distorted.

2. The universal gospel.

It came out of the Enlightenment and the liberal theology that followed, from the eighteenth through the twentieth century. It teaches that all humanity will be reconciled and saved in the end: "A loving God wouldn't judge. Everyone is accepted in the end." Its root is an aversion to judgment and eternal consequences. But Jesus said, "For the Son of Man will come with his angels in the glory of his Father and will judge all people according to their deeds" (Matthew 16:27). Truth doesn't change to make us comfortable. It calls us to repentance.

3. The hyper-grace gospel. It rose with modern grace movements from the late 1990s into the 2010s. It says grace removes the need for

repentance and ongoing holiness: “You’re already forgiven. Sin doesn’t matter anymore.” Its root is a desire to remove guilt without transformation. I told a story about this one in *The Power of the Spirit of Adoption*, so I’ll only add Paul’s answer: “Should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? Of course not!” (Romans 6:1–2). Grace is not an excuse to stay the same.

4. The Christ-plus-works gospel.

This one was formalized in the institutional church between the 300s and the 1500s, and it’s alive in every tradition, including the most Protestant ones. It says faith in Christ must be completed by religious effort and participation. Its root is a need for control, structure and self-justification. Paul’s answer is plain: “God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Salvation is not earned. It is received.

5. The McChurch gospel.

It grew with the seeker-sensitive and megachurch movements of the 1980s and is still with us. It says the church should attract and keep people through relevance and comfort: “Make church appealing, easy and enjoyable so people will come.” Its root is consumerism and entertainment culture. We looked at this one in the first chapters of this book. When church becomes a product, people become customers.



6. The Spirit-minimized gospel.

It took hold between the 1700s and the 1900s, partly from Enlightenment rationalism and partly as a reaction to real excesses. It reduces Christianity to intellect, morality or tradition: “Faith is about belief and order, not supernatural power or encounter.” Its root is fear of the supernatural and of losing control. Scripture tells us, “Do not bring sorrow to God’s Holy Spirit by the way you live” (Ephesians 4:30). When the Spirit is shut out, the Church becomes informed but not transformed.

7. The charismatic imbalance gospel.

This is the mirror image of the last one. It has grown since the Pentecostal and charismatic movements of the 1900s, especially in the late twentieth century. It says power, gifts and experiences validate spirituality: “If there are signs and miracles, God must be moving. Character is secondary.” Its root is a pursuit of power and experience over formation. The cure is the same for both: “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think” (Romans 12:2). Signs can impress, but character reflects Christ.

8. The anti-Scripture gospel.

It grew from the higher criticism of the 1800s into the postmodernism of today. It says truth is subjective and Scripture is not the final authority: “The Bible is flawed or outdated. We define truth now.” Its root is a desire to redefine truth on personal or cultural terms. When Scripture is questioned, truth becomes relative, authority is rejected, and we redefine God to fit us.

9. The word of faith gospel.

It gained prominence in the 1970s. It treats faith as a force to obtain health, wealth and success: “Say it, claim it, believe it, and you will receive it. Your words create your reality.” Its root is a blend of Scripture with

positive confession and self-help philosophy. Yes, “the tongue can bring death or life” (Proverbs 18:21). But that doesn’t mean our words and confessions change reality. It invites us to step into God’s will and wait on His timing. Jesus warned, “Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves” (Matthew 7:15).

10. The social justice gospel.

It was most prominent in the Progressive Era, from the 1880s to the 1920s, and it has many modern forms. It elevates physical and emotional needs, such as resources, education, health, justice and equality, while minimizing the deeper need for salvation, repentance and transformation in Christ. Caring for the poor is not the error. Jesus fed the hungry, and so must we. The error is offering drinking water while forgetting to offer living water. Societal reform can’t solve humanity’s deepest problem while sin and the need for a new birth are played down. Compassion must point to Christ.

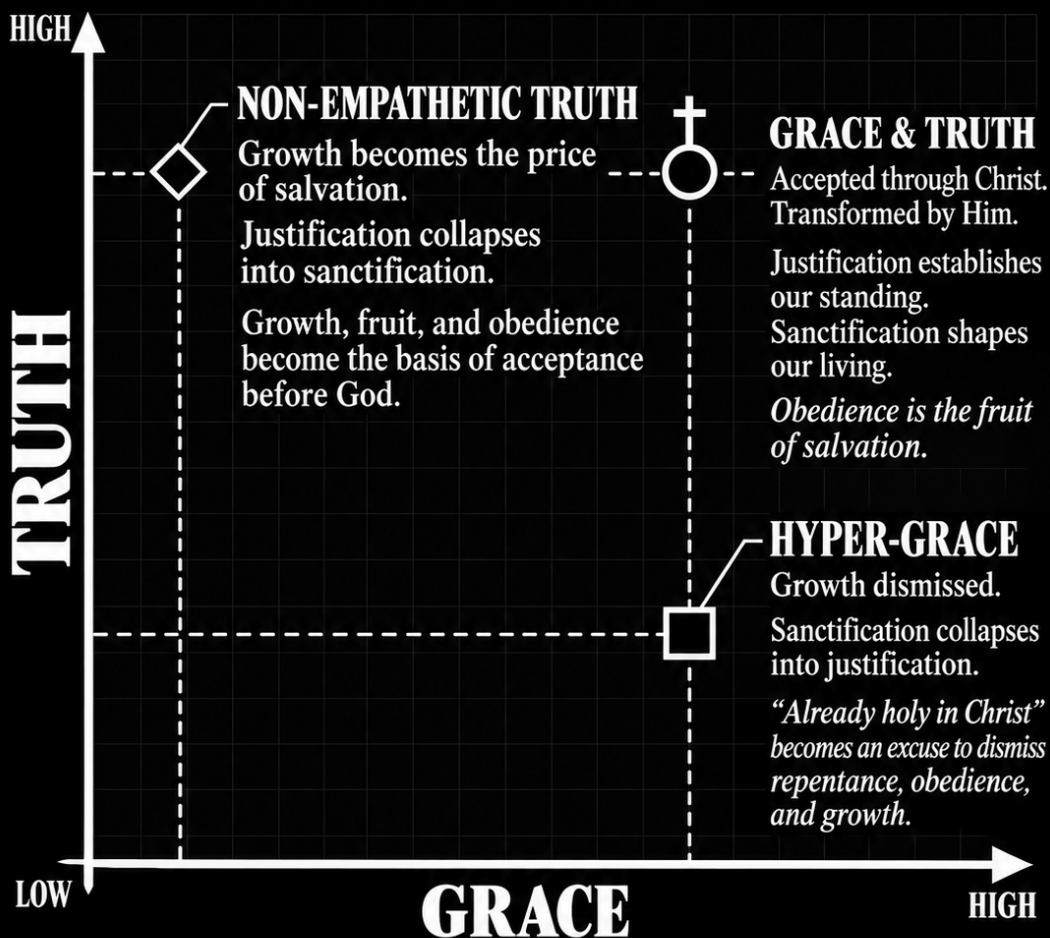
11. The fatalistic gospel.

I want to handle this one with care, because sincere believers I respect hold strong views on God’s sovereignty, and Scripture does speak of being chosen in Him. The counterfeit is the version that turns sovereignty into fatalism: “God has already determined everything, so nothing I do or pray really matters.” Its root is a desire to resolve mystery with control. When that thinking takes hold, urgency dies. People stop praying, stop sharing their faith, and stop pleading for the lost. But Paul, who wrote the most about God’s choosing, also wrote, “And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?” (Romans 10:14). God’s sovereignty was never meant to make us passive.

Every counterfeit gospel is built on a real desire. That’s what makes it so easy to believe.

ANOTHER GOSPEL

The Distortions of Hyper-Grace & Non-Empathetic Truth



**SALVATION IS A GIFT.
GROWTH IS ITS FRUIT.**

The Throne Is Not Shared

There's one more counterfeit I want to name, and it doesn't come with a theology so much as an allegiance.

Any time a leader, a movement, a party or a nation receives the kind of loyalty that belongs only to Jesus, something has gone wrong. It can feel like faithfulness, tradition, protection or standing for what is right. But when sacred devotion shifts from Christ to anything else, devotion becomes idolatry.

Jesus honored earthly authority without worshiping it. Standing before Pilate, the most powerful official in the region, He said, "But my Kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Can you imagine Him pledging His ultimate allegiance to any flag, empire or campaign?

Christ alone is Savior and King. The throne is not shared. When devotion to anything else starts to compete with devotion to Him, the Church must choose the Kingdom of God.

**Honor every authority God allows. Worship only the King
He appointed.**

A Fraud Gospel

One day the Lord told me to look up the term "fraud marriage."

A fraud marriage is a marriage of convenience. Two people enter it with no intention of creating a real marriage. They sign the papers to gain something: money, benefits or citizenship. The vows are spoken, but no one means them.

Then I saw what He was showing me. A fraud gospel works the same way. It's a contract of convenience with no intention of entering a covenant relationship. The goal is to collect the rewards of the relationship without taking on any of its responsibilities: happiness, financial blessing, and

citizenship in heaven, all without a cross. That's the prosperity gospel and the hyper-grace gospel in a single sentence.

William Booth, the founder of The Salvation Army, is credited with a warning that reads like a description of our day. He said a day was coming when there would be "a religion without repentance, a salvation without the Holy Spirit, a Heaven without Hell."

So here's the question. When we came to Jesus, did we sign up for a marriage or for a benefits package?

I'll be honest about where God dealt with me on this. For years my prayer was, "Use me, God." And I watched gifted people get used mightily and then fall apart. One day I asked Him, "But God, You used these people." And I heard Him say, "Good fathers don't use their children."

I believe God is shifting a generation from "Use me, God" to "Know me, God." He isn't looking for employees. He's looking for a Bride.

Jesus said it plainly: "What this world honors is detestable in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). And when people value what God finds detestable, they tend to despise what God finds valuable.

A fraud gospel wants the benefits of the marriage without the vows.

Back to the Real Jesus

So how do we keep from being deceived? Not by becoming suspicious of everyone, and not by memorizing every error. We do it the way a bank teller does. We study the real thing until a counterfeit feels wrong in our hands.

That means reading the Gospels for yourself instead of only hearing about them. It means letting Jesus say things you don't like. It means asking the Holy Spirit to show you where you've been editing Him. And it

means staying in a family of believers who love you enough to tell you when your Jesus has started to look a lot like you.

Paul's instruction is simple: "Test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

The good news is that the real Jesus is still there, exactly where the apostles left Him. He hasn't been updated. He doesn't need to be. He is the same yesterday, today and forever, and He is better than every version of Him we could ever invent.

For the Road

1. Be honest: which parts of the Jesus you follow come from Scripture, and which come from culture, preference or entertainment?
2. Which of the counterfeit gospels in this chapter have you been most tempted to believe? What real desire in you does it promise to meet?
3. When was the last time Jesus told you something in His Word that you didn't want to hear? What did you do with it?

Study the real Jesus until every counterfeit feels wrong in your hands.

Chapter 7

The Religion Business

And so you cancel the word of God in order to hand down your own tradition. And this is only one example among many others.

Mark 7:13

William Wilberforce was a British Member of Parliament who used his influence, his voice and his biblical convictions to fight the transatlantic slave trade. Working alongside other reformers, he exposed its cruelty year after year until the Slave Trade Act of 1807 banned it throughout the British Empire.

It took twenty years. In other nations, freedom came even more slowly, because whole economies depended on enslaved labor. Powerful interests resisted change, afraid of financial loss and social upheaval.

History reveals a sobering pattern: systems built on power and profit rarely surrender willingly, even when they're confronted with biblical truth.

I believe the same danger lives in the Church. When leaders fear losing control, financial security or position, reformation gets resisted, not because the truth is unclear, but because obeying it will cost something.

Systems built on power and profit rarely let go willingly, in the world or in the Church.

Historic Slavery and Spiritual Slavery

From the beginning, God's demand of Pharaoh was about worship.

This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: How long will you refuse to submit to me? Let my people go, so they can worship me.

Exodus 10:3

Pharaoh understood exactly what was at stake. If those people left, his whole system would collapse. So he negotiated. Go, but don't go far. Go, but leave your children. Go, but leave your flocks. Every offer kept a chain on God's people.

There is a historic slavery that chains the body, and there is a spiritual slavery that chains the soul. The second kind can live inside a church building. It shows up when people are kept dependent on a platform instead of being taught to hear God for themselves. It shows up when traditions of men are guarded more fiercely than the Word of God. It shows up when serving the machine becomes the measure of serving the Lord.

I call it the religion business.

Jesus confronted it directly. "For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition" (Mark 7:8). A few verses later He said those traditions had cancelled the Word of God. Nobody tore a page out of the Scriptures. They simply built something on top of them until the Word could no longer be heard.

So here's the question every church and every leader needs to ask: when it comes to our structures and our ideas, are we preserving what is biblical, or protecting what is influential and profitable? Whenever we choose the second, revival tarries.

So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law.

Galatians 5:1

God didn't free us from Pharaoh so we could build Pharaoh a church.

Pharaoh or Father?

Chapter 2 named the business model of church. Here I want to look at the man at the top of it.

Many churches have quietly abandoned the elder model of the New Testament and adopted the CEO model, even though it has no biblical foundation. The apostles didn't hire a chief executive to run the church in each city. They "appointed elders in every church" (Acts 14:23). Leadership was shared, local, accountable and fatherly.

Without wise leadership, a nation falls; there is safety in having many advisers.

Proverbs 11:14

When the counsel of many advisers disappears, something dangerous happens. Gifted men and women who are more in love with their own opinions than with the Word of God go spiritually rogue. They see a circle of elders as a restriction instead of a protection. They don't recognize that wise counsel is how God trains them to be better leaders.

Underneath it is insecurity. Insecure leaders can't take counsel from elders, because they believe the lie that a good leader shouldn't need anyone. To them, needing others is weakness. In truth, it's wisdom. So they surround themselves with yes-men and with people too afraid to voice an honest opinion, because speaking up might get them fired or cancelled as a friend.

Every shepherd needs trusted voices who can point out blind spots and challenge the weak places in his life. A CEO pastor who has traded those voices for loyal employees has settled for the traditions of men instead of the will of God.

Malachi prophesied that God would turn “the hearts of fathers to their children” (Malachi 4:6). He didn’t say He would turn the hearts of the CEO to the employees.

It takes a Pharaoh to rule an empire. It takes spiritual fathers to restore the Kingdom of God.

Paul knew the difference. “For even if you had ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, you have only one spiritual father. For I became your father in Christ Jesus when I preached the Good News to you” (1 Corinthians 4:15). Teachers can be hired. Fathers have to be grown.

And when leaders demand loyalty to themselves rather than to the God of the Scriptures, they need to be met with the humble courage of Peter: “We must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29). Honor is real and biblical. But honor was never meant to be a leash.

If we’re going to rebuild on the ancient foundations, we have to rediscover the Acts of the New Testament Church and lead our churches with spiritual fathers and mothers rather than a Pharaoh in a corner office.

Shepherd or CEO?

There are two kinds of faith competing in the house of God. I call one the convenience of Churchianity and the other the cost of discipleship.

Churchianity is a cultural Christianity built on comfort, routine, attendance and platform. It values entertainment and tradition over

discipleship and a personal relationship with Jesus. Discipleship is built on sacrifice, self-denial and shepherding.

Picture a few scenes and ask which kind of faith is speaking.

A church celebrates: “Attendance is up 40 percent this year, so God must be pleased with us.” That’s convenience. The benchmark of success has become attendance instead of the movement of the Holy Spirit. Crowds can be gathered by entertainment. Disciples are made by the cross.

A pastor’s brand is booming: a book deal, a podcast, a merch table in the lobby. Jesus never built an empire, never strategized growth models and never cultivated a personal brand. When pastors become executives, the congregation becomes an audience to be retained.

A staff meeting runs for two hours on metrics, growth targets and branding, and nobody prays. Somewhere we began valuing efficiency over depth, control over mystery, and predictability over the movement of the Spirit. That’s one reason revival tarries.

Now picture a different pastor. He spends his week visiting the sick and discipling five men. None of it will ever trend online. That’s the cost of discipleship.

Jesus drew the line Himself.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don’t belong to him and he isn’t their shepherd.

John 10:11–12

A shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A CEO monetizes them.

This is where reformation gets hard. Many people rejoice at the idea of reformation until they realize the stage they hoped to be celebrated on has been replaced by an altar where they're meant to be crucified. And it isn't only pastors. You can serve at every event and never miss a Sunday and still not have opened your Bible on your own in a year. Churchianity measures attendance. Jesus measures the heart. "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matthew 15:8).

The good news is that the cost of discipleship is also the doorway to everything we've been praying for. When revival really comes, it will wreck your calendar: less TV, less sleep, more prayer, more repentance. That's what we're asking for when we pray for it. "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23).

The stage celebrates you. The altar transforms you.

A Tale of Three Fathers

If the Church is going to be led by fathers again, we need to learn to recognize fathers. Every one of us hears three of them.

1. **Father God: trust and obey.** Worship Him, and follow where He leads.
2. **Your earthly father: honor and learn.** Learn from the good and the bad.
3. **The false father: resist and flee.** Reject the lie, and stay watchful.

The trouble is that the voices get confused, and each confusion has its own trap.

Trusting the false father is Eve's trap. He often sounds like a mentor, or even like God. Picture a leader you admire telling you, "Cut this corner at work. You deserve success now, and you can make it right later." That

voice is pushing you toward selfish ambition so it can steal your destiny. Resist the devil, and he will flee (James 4:7).

Sometimes the lie comes through your earthly father, but its source is still the father of lies (John 8:44). Picture money getting tight and hearing, “You have to be your own provider. You can’t count on anyone.” A lie learned from a father who didn’t provide becomes a lie about God. Honor your dad. Resist the lie.

Sometimes we mistake Father God for the false father. Through a father wound, His discipline can sound like withholding. Picture a hard season and hearing Him say, “I’m not withholding from you. I’m training you, because you’re My child.” Distrust toward Him is the trap of Psalm 73.

And sometimes we give an earthly father the place only God deserves. Honor isn’t blind loyalty. Your father deserves honor, and so do the spiritual fathers God gives you, but only God deserves total trust and obedience.

Like the three primary colors, seeing Father God, your earthly father and the false father in the right light clears your vision. Having a good or a bad father doesn’t determine your path. How you see the three fathers will shape your destiny.

*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

**Your father’s story doesn’t decide your destiny. How you
see the three fathers does.**

Six Mixtures

Why does the Church so often look like a prodigal Bride instead of a sanctified one? Part of the answer is that we're quick to judge those outside the church, who don't have the Holy Spirit, while we neglect to hold accountable those inside our own walls who say they do. Jesus never told us to stop judging. He told us to judge with self-awareness instead of self-righteousness.

So let's start inside our own walls. The religion business survives on mixture. Here are six I see in the Church.

1. **Positional righteousness without practical righteousness.** We're made right with God through Jesus' blood, but that position is meant to produce a changed life. Your actions don't earn your salvation. They show the evidence of your transformation. "Faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless" (James 2:17).
2. **A mixture of the profane and the holy.** God's charge against Israel's priests was that "they make no distinction between what is holy and what is not" (Ezekiel 22:26). When the sacred and the common blur together, people lose the ability to tell them apart.
3. **Rewards without responsibilities.** We want the blessings of the Kingdom without its obligations: the inheritance without the stewardship, the crown without the cross.
4. **Legally adopted, but an orphan mindset.** We've been brought into God's family, but we still live like fearful slaves, anxious and striving (Romans 8:15). I wrote a whole book on that one, so I'll leave it there.
5. **Opinions without conviction.** We feel strongly about the issues of the day, yet our feelings never turn into convictions that change how we actually live.
6. **Lovers of mercy who reject justice.** We want God's mercy for ourselves and ignore what Jesus called "the more important aspects of

the law—justice, mercy, and faith” (Matthew 23:23). Mercy and justice were never meant to be separated.

Every one of these mixtures has the same root: a moment of faith that never became a way of life. We trust His Word and His Spirit to do what we can’t do in our own strength, the way a seed relies on soil, water and sun to grow.

A moment of biblical repentance without a lifestyle of daily renewing of the mind will lead to a lifetime of worldly rebellion.

Let My People Go

I don’t write any of this as a cynic. I love the Church. She is the Bride of Christ, and Jesus isn’t finished with her.

Remember how the Exodus ended. Pharaoh’s system didn’t let go willingly, but it let go. God heard the cry of His people, and He brought them out with a strong hand, not to wander, but to worship Him at His mountain.

He is still saying the same thing to every system that holds His people: “Let my people go, so they can worship me.” And He is raising up shepherds who know their sheep by name, elders who welcome counsel, and spiritual fathers and mothers who would rather build sons and daughters than build a brand.

If you’ve been wounded by the religion business, don’t let it convince you that the Father is like the Pharaoh. He isn’t. He’s the One who came to set you free.

For the Road

1. Where in your church life (or your own leadership) are you protecting what is influential or profitable instead of preserving what is biblical?

2. Of the three fathers, whose voice have you been confusing with another's? What would it look like to trust, honor or resist in the right place this week?
3. Which of the six mixtures do you recognize in yourself, and what would it take for a moment of repentance to become a lifestyle?

The Church doesn't need another Pharaoh. She needs fathers, and the Father is still saying, "Let My people go."

Chapter 8

The Kingdom of Saul

He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.

John 3:30

Picture an army marching out to war, and almost nobody in it has a weapon.

That's the scene in 1 Samuel 13. Israel is facing the Philistines, and the soldiers are carrying farm tools. The Scripture explains that the Philistines had kept blacksmiths out of the land so the Hebrews couldn't make weapons. Then it adds one sentence that I can't stop thinking about.

So on the day of the battle none of the people of Israel had a sword or spear, except for Saul and Jonathan.

1 Samuel 13:22

The king was armed. The king's son was armed. Everyone else went to battle with sharpened plows.

I see in that verse a picture of much of the Church. The platform has all the weapons. The people in the seats have pitchforks. We've built a culture where a few gifted people carry the sword of the Spirit, and everyone else is expected to watch them swing it. Then the day of battle comes, a marriage cracks or a diagnosis lands or a son walks away from God, and the saints discover they were never trained to fight.

Jesus gave leaders to the Church for one reason: “to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church” (Ephesians 4:12). A leader who keeps the swords for himself isn’t protecting the people. He’s protecting his position.

**A healthy leader measures success by how many swords
he puts in other people’s hands.**

The Kingdom of Saul

In an earlier book I wrote about the Sauls in your life, the people in authority who feel threatened by your calling. This chapter is harder, because it’s about the Saul in us. You can’t control a Saul. But you can refuse to become one.

When I talk about a Kingdom of Saul, I mean a ministry that has quietly become a leader’s personal kingdom. It runs on status, control and self-interest. It produces celebrity pastors and CEO-style shepherds. The Kingdom of David looks different. It’s led by servant leaders who are humble, empowered by the Spirit, and more interested in the presence of God than in the size of their platform.

Saul was anointed. He prophesied. He won battles.

**Saul didn’t start out building his own kingdom. He drifted
there, one fearful decision at a time.**

That’s why we need to know the signs.

Five Signs a Leader Has Been Infected

The root under every one of these signs is what I call the spirit of competition. Here’s how it shows up in leaders.

- 1. Leading by human will instead of being led by the Spirit.** Saul was told to wait for Samuel. When the days dragged on and the army

began to slip away, he offered the sacrifice himself. His excuse sounds like a church growth meeting: “I saw my men scattering from me” (1 Samuel 13:11). When attendance drops, a Saul reaches for a strategy. A David reaches for God.

2. **Failing to equip others out of codependency.** This is the sword problem. An insecure leader needs the people to need him. So he never trains anyone who might one day outshine him, and the whole army stays defenseless.
3. **Building monuments to yourself.** After Saul disobeyed God’s command about the Amalekites, Samuel went looking for him and was told, “Saul went to the town of Carmel to set up a monument to himself” (1 Samuel 15:12). Think about that. Saul had just failed God, and the first thing he did was build a memorial to his own success.
4. **Pleasing people instead of obeying God.** When Samuel confronted him, Saul admitted the truth: “I was afraid of the people and did what they demanded” (1 Samuel 15:24). Paul said it plainly: “If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ’s servant” (Galatians 1:10).
5. **Manipulating others to cosign your compromise.** Saul’s next words weren’t about God at all. “Please, at least honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel” (1 Samuel 15:30). He wanted the prophet standing next to him in public so nobody would see what God had said in private. Repentance had become a performance to save face.

Notice the order. It starts with impatience and ends with manipulation. Nobody wakes up one morning and decides to build a monument to himself. It begins the day we stop waiting on God.

**Saul failed God and built a monument. David failed God
and wrote Psalm 51.**

Seven Marks of the Spirit of Competition

The story of Saul and David gives us seven marks of the spirit of competition. Read them slowly, and let the Holy Spirit search your heart before you think of anyone else.

1. It tries to put its armor on you.

When David volunteered to fight Goliath, Saul dressed him in his own armor.

Then Saul gave David his own armor—a bronze helmet and a coat of mail. David put it on, strapped the sword over it, and took a step or two to see what it was like, for he had never worn such things before. “I can’t go in these,” he protested to Saul. “I’m not used to them.” So David took them off again.

1 Samuel 17:38–39

The armor of Saul is control dressed up as help. When you win wearing someone else’s methods, they claim the credit. When you lose, they blame you for not doing it the way only they could do it. Either way, the outcome serves the Kingdom of Saul.

David’s anointing came privately, from God, in a field far away from the crowds. Saul had nothing to do with it, and he couldn’t stand that. Keep the armor God gave you, so your victories bring glory to God and not to someone else’s agenda.

2. It makes servants instead of raising sons and daughters.

The spirit of competition keeps you from fathering and mothering the gifted people God puts in your life. You become more concerned with creating servants you can control than with discipling sons and daughters you can empower.

Spiritual fathers and mothers aren't supposed to be jealous of their children's accomplishments. A father wants his son to go further than he did.

When the spirit of competition gets bottled up, it turns into resentment. Resentment takes the pain of our own failure and reassigns it to a scapegoat. David became Saul's scapegoat for Saul's own refusal to fully repent and obey.

3. It wants the praise of people more than the praise of God.

Many people did believe in him, however, including some of the Jewish leaders. But they wouldn't admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. For they loved human praise more than the praise of God.

John 12:42–43

Saul heard the women singing, "Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands!" And he did the math. "They credit David with ten thousands and me with only thousands. Next they'll be making him their king!" (1 Samuel 18:7–8). He was keeping score on the applause.

A leader who lives for applause will make people dependent on him rather than making disciples who are connected to the true Vine.

4. It confuses stewardship with ownership.

Saul seems to have forgotten that the kingdom of Israel never belonged to him. It belonged to God. I believe this is the sin of the hour in the Church. The sheep don't belong to earthly shepherds. They belong to the King of kings.

Look at what David did when his own son Absalom came to take the throne.

“Then we must flee at once, or it will be too late!” David urged his men. “Hurry! If we get out of the city before Absalom arrives, both we and the city of Jerusalem will be spared from disaster.”

2 Samuel 15:14

David walked away from his palace to keep the people and the city from being destroyed. He was more concerned about protecting the people than protecting his platform and his legacy. Saul would have burned the city down to keep the crown.

An owner protects the throne. A steward protects the people.

5. It uses spears of slander to eliminate threats.

Saul hurled his spear “intending to pin David to the wall” (1 Samuel 18:11). Today the spears are usually words: slander, accusation, a whisper campaign against anyone who might threaten a leader’s personal kingdom.

It’s sobering that Pilate, a pagan governor, could see what the religious leaders couldn’t see in themselves. “He knew very well that the religious leaders had arrested Jesus out of envy” (Matthew 27:18). Often the world’s system recognizes the spirit of competition in the Church before God’s people do.

Sometimes the Church looks more like a set of corporate franchises than a consecrated Kingdom family. A coffee shop has every reason to be nervous when a new drive-through opens down the street. That’s a competitor. But when a new church is planted down the street, that’s family moving into the neighborhood. Multiplication should never be viewed as a threat in the Church.

6. It’s agitated by what it should admire.

Saul watched David succeed, and instead of rejoicing he grew afraid (1 Samuel 18:15). The very thing that should have brought him joy, a young man winning battles for Israel, became the thing he couldn't bear.

Envy hates what it should love and admire.

So here's the question: are we jealous for the praise of men, or are we jealous for His glory? When Jesus drove the merchants out of the Temple, His disciples remembered the Scripture: "Passion for God's house will consume me" (John 2:17). That's the right kind of jealousy. Do we get more stirred up when our favorite team loses than when we see people treating God's glory like a common thing? Saul was consumed with gathering followers. David was consumed with building a house for the Lord (Psalm 132:1-5).

7. It mislabels faithful allies as enemies.

David was the most loyal servant Saul ever had. He played music to calm the king's torment, fought his battles, and refused to lift a hand against him even when he had the chance. And Saul spent years hunting him as an enemy.

There's an old fable about a little bird that waited too long to fly south for the winter. It froze and fell into a field. A cow wandered by and dropped a pile of manure right on top of it. The warmth thawed the bird out, and it was so happy it began to sing. A passing cat heard the singing, dug the bird out, and ate it.

The morals are simple. Not everyone who drops something unpleasant on you is your enemy. Not everyone who pulls you out of it is your friend. And don't ignore the times and seasons.

The spirit of competition can't tell the difference. It mistakes correction for attack and flattery for loyalty, and it turns the very people God sent to help it into targets.

The Cure: The Jonathan Anointing

If the disease is the spirit of Saul, the cure was living in Saul's own house.

After David had finished talking with Saul, he met Jonathan, the king's son. There was an immediate bond between them, for Jonathan loved David. From that day on Saul kept David with him and wouldn't let him return home. And Jonathan made a solemn pact with David, because he loved him as he loved himself. Jonathan sealed the pact by taking off his robe and giving it to David, together with his tunic, sword, bow, and belt.

1 Samuel 18:1-4

Who had the legal right to be the next king of Israel? Jonathan did. He was the crown prince. On the day of that earlier battle, he had been one of only two men in Israel with a sword. And he took it off and handed it to David.

Saul put his armor on David to control him. Jonathan took his armor off to release him.

Later, when David was running for his life, Jonathan found him and said, "You are going to be the king of Israel, and I will be next to you" (1 Samuel 23:17).

Jonathan wanted the will of the Father more than he wanted the will of his father.

Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.

Philippians 2:3-4

Here are five signs of the Jonathan anointing, which is another way of describing the spirit of excellence.

1. **Legacy vs. inheritance.** You recognize that what God has called you to do is more important than what the world says you're entitled to. Jonathan was entitled to a throne. He chose a calling instead.
2. **Empowerment vs. enslavement.** You delight more in using your resources and relationships to help the people around you reach their destiny than in advancing your own ambitions.
3. **Intimacy vs. influence.** Being known and trusted by God matters more to you than being recognized and revered by people.
4. **Kingdom vs. empire.** God's spiritual family matters more to you than your natural family and its dynasty. Jesus said, "Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!" (Matthew 12:50).
5. **Worship vs. humanism.** You walk in the fear of the Lord rather than the fear of man. "Fearing people is a dangerous trap, but trusting the LORD means safety" (Proverbs 29:25).

From the outside, Jonathan's choice looks like loss. He never wore the crown. But Jesus described exactly what Jonathan understood.

If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?

Matthew 16:25–26

Saul held on to a kingdom and lost it. Jonathan gave one away and is remembered as one of the truest friends in all of Scripture.

So let me ask you what I have to keep asking myself. Has the spirit of competition gotten into you? Has the voice that says "God is holding back from me" drowned out the voice of the Spirit of truth, whispering, "Not my will, but Yours be done"?

Here's the good news. The Kingdom of Saul doesn't last. God is raising up a generation of Jonathans in His Church: fathers and mothers who hand their swords to their sons and daughters, leaders who would rather see David crowned than keep the throne, and ordinary believers who have stopped counting thousands and ten thousands. That's what the Acts 2 Church looked like. Nobody claimed that their possessions were their own (Acts 4:32), and nobody was keeping score.

That's the ancient path, and it's open to anyone willing to take off their armor.

For the Road

1. Which of the five signs or the seven marks did the Holy Spirit put His finger on as you read? Where do you see a little of Saul in yourself?
2. Who has God placed in your life that you could equip, empower or "hand your sword" to in this season?
3. Is there anyone you've mislabeled as a rival or an enemy who may actually be an ally God sent to help you?

A Saul keeps the sword. A Jonathan hands it to the next king.

Chapter 9

Cain Was Competing, Abel Was Convicted

You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master.

Genesis 4:7

The first murder in the Bible wasn't over money, land or a woman. It happened over worship.

Two brothers brought offerings to God. One was accepted and one wasn't. And the brother who wasn't accepted didn't fall on his face in repentance. He walked his brother out into a field and killed him.

John tells us why.

We must not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and killed his brother. And why did he kill him? Because Cain had been doing what was evil, and his brother had been doing what was right.

1 John 3:12

Cain didn't kill Abel simply because Abel was righteous. He killed him because Abel's righteousness exposed his own heart. What should have provoked Cain to repentance awakened jealousy, rivalry and hatred instead. Rather than letting his brother's offering stir up spiritual hunger in him, he let comparison corrupt him.

That same seed has been growing in God's house ever since. The spirit of competition is what caused Cain to kill Abel, and it's the same seed that caused the religious leaders to hand Jesus over to be crucified.

Light doesn't attack darkness. It exposes it, and darkness rarely forgives that.

Two Offerings

When it was time for the harvest, Cain presented some of his crops as a gift to the LORD. Abel also brought a gift—the best portions of the firstborn lambs from his flock. The LORD accepted Abel and his gift, but he did not accept Cain and his gift. This made Cain very angry, and he looked dejected.

Genesis 4:3–5

Cain came to God on the basis of what he had accomplished in his own will and strength. Abel came with a blood sacrifice, pointing ahead to what Jesus would accomplish on the cross. Hebrews says, "It was by faith that Abel brought a more acceptable offering to God than Cain did" (Hebrews 11:4).

Cain brought the work of his hands. Abel brought his faith.

Fruit is always the evidence of our salvation, never the wages of it.

Here's the heart of this chapter. Cain was competing, but Abel was convicted. Abel brought his offering in obedience. Cain brought his as a performance, and when it didn't measure up, he turned on the brother whose offering did.

Samuel told King Saul, "Obedience is better than sacrifice" (1 Samuel 15:22). God doesn't honor every sacrifice, but He does honor obedience.

Martha was busy serving while Mary was busy surrendering, and Jesus said Mary had chosen what was better (Luke 10:42).

Correction Felt as Rejection

Look at what God did after He refused Cain's offering. He didn't walk away. He came to Cain and asked him questions. "Why are you so angry? Why do you look so dejected?" (Genesis 4:6). Then He offered him a way forward: "You will be accepted if you do what is right."

That was correction, and it came with an open door. But Cain heard it as rejection.

The spirit of competition makes us see God's correction as rejection.

We feel rejected by God when we feel our offering isn't as valuable or significant as what someone else brings. That's carnal comparison. When we bring God an offering of praise and thankfulness, the focus is on Him. When we bring an offering to be measured against someone else's, the focus is on us, and we'll always find someone to lose against.

Notice the word "dejected." Envy and depression are closely linked, because both are rooted in feelings of inadequacy. Comparing ourselves to others makes us painfully aware of what we lack. That breeds resentment, and resentment deepens into hopelessness. In that place the enemy pushes us from quiet despair toward active envy that attacks others to lift ourselves up.

Cain wasn't depressed because he lacked talent or provision. He was depressed because of his worldview. He saw life as winning or losing. The orphan mindset has to compete for identity, because in an orphan's reality unconditional love doesn't exist.

A lot of our discouragement comes from the same place. We're living from the ideology of "I'm losing" instead of the perspective of "I'm willingly laying down my life."

This is why our gifts can become a trap. When we try to use our assignment as an offering to earn God's approval, instead of an opportunity to obey Him, we fall into the depression of Cain. Our talents, gifts and creativity were never meant to be the offering. They're opportunities for simple obedience, faithful stewardship, and the joy of reflecting the God whose image we bear.

Even the twelve disciples fell into this. On the night Jesus was betrayed, hours before the cross, "they began to argue among themselves about who would be the greatest among them" (Luke 22:24). After three and a half years with Jesus, they were still keeping score. Only the blood of Jesus and the indwelling Holy Spirit can uproot that seed.

The Broken Leg and the River

An envious, greedy man believes the lie that his own stride will improve if his neighbor has a broken leg. A generous, empowering soul sees life as a flowing river, not a finite pie. He knows there's abundance for everyone in the Kingdom of God, so he celebrates his neighbor's victories. There's more than enough for everyone to prosper.

**Often God tests your heart to see if you're ready for success
by giving your neighbor success.**

He's watching to see whether you'll celebrate their win or sulk in self-pity, believing you deserve what He gave them. "Be happy with those who are happy," Paul wrote, "and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). Most of us find the weeping easier. Here's a hard question: do you delight more in people's wilderness than in their promised land?

Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary defines envy this way:

“To feel uneasiness, mortification or discontent, at the sight of superior excellence, reputation or happiness enjoyed by another; to repine at another’s prosperity; to fret or grieve one’s self at the real or supposed superiority of another, and to hate him on that account.”

Noah Webster

Look at where that definition ends. It starts as discomfort, and it ends in hatred. That’s Cain’s path exactly.

The film *Amadeus* tells a fictionalized version of this story. As a young man, the composer Antonio Salieri promises God his devotion if God will make him a great composer. He becomes famous. Then he meets Mozart, a crude, immature young man with a gift far beyond his own. Salieri can’t understand why God would give such genius to someone like that instead of to him. He decides God is mocking him through Mozart, turns his back on his faith, and sets out to destroy the man whose music he secretly loves. He asked to be the best when he could have asked to be blessed.

When the orphan mindset becomes your worldview, you believe the lie that to be somebody, you have to beat everybody.

A Confession

I can’t write about this from a safe distance.

Some years ago I ministered alongside a friend I’ll call Tobias for the first time. As I watched him minister, the spirit of competition stirred in me. Instead of spurring me to serve better, it tempted me toward envy. I was coveting his gift, and it went far enough that it bred a kind of hatred in me. I felt small and insignificant.

After the service I had to repent. I went to him and admitted it. “I’m sorry,” I told him. “I let my pride get in the way.”

Choosing humility over pride didn't make me smaller. It turned the sting into fresh devotion to the work, and loosened the grip that applause had on me.

We often compete with the very people God wants us to connect with.

The spirit of competition causes us to resent the people who complement our calling in the Body of Christ. The very people who need our love and celebration receive our rejection and criticism instead. And you can't truly serve someone you're in competition with. You can't wash the feet of someone you're trying to beat.

C. S. Lewis saw this clearly:

"Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man."

C. S. Lewis

Best, Perfect, Excellent

There are three spirits that can drive us, and they sound alike, so we need to tell them apart.

The spirit of competition says, "You have to be the best."

The spirit of perfectionism says, "I can't make a mistake."

The spirit of excellence says, "You have to give your best."

Competition is about comparison. Perfectionism is about fear. Excellence is about love. Only one of them can last a lifetime.

Here's how the spirit of competition compares with the spirit of excellence:

- A winning-or-losing obsession, or a learning-and-growing obsession
- "Am I the best?" or "Am I giving my best?"

- Focused on results, or focused on effort
- Valuing success, or valuing integrity
- The goal of individualism, or the goal of unity

The spirit of excellence runs all through Scripture. David refused to give God an offering that cost him nothing (2 Samuel 24:24). Daniel had “an excellent spirit” in him (Daniel 6:3, KJV). Jesus watched the rich drop their gifts into the Temple treasury, then pointed to a poor widow with two small coins and said she had given more than all of them (Luke 21:1-4). She wasn’t the biggest giver in the room. She gave her best.

So ask yourself: are we giving Jesus our best, or what’s left?

“Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people” (Colossians 3:23). A person with a spirit of excellence can rest in God’s judgment, because they’ve given their best out of gratitude, and they look forward to hearing, “Well done, my good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21). Someone fixated on being the best, or on never making a mistake, will be tormented by fear of failure and regret over missed opportunities. The fear of man ends up steering them instead of the unconditional love of the Father.

The spirit of competition shames, condemns and oppresses people, and keeps them trapped in the wilderness. The spirit of excellence equips, empowers and trains them, so they can step into their promised land.

I don’t want to be the biggest or the best. I want to be faithful.

Pasta at the Olive Garden

A mentor of mine once went to an Olive Garden and discovered they had run out of pasta. He couldn’t get over it. How does a pasta place run out of pasta?

It got him thinking about the Church. People expect pasta at an Olive Garden, and they expect love among the disciples of Jesus. Jesus said that's how the world would recognize us: "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples" (John 13:35). When the love is missing, people walk out disappointed and wonder whether the whole thing was real.

A church full of Cains is an Olive Garden without pasta. It has the building, the menu and the sign out front, and none of what people came for.

But the story of Cain and Abel doesn't get the last word. Abel's blood cried out from the ground for justice (Genesis 4:10). Then another innocent Brother was killed out of envy, and His blood speaks a better word.

You have come to Jesus, the one who mediates the new covenant between God and people, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks of forgiveness instead of crying out for vengeance like the blood of Abel.

Hebrews 12:24

That blood speaks forgiveness even over the Cain in us. So let's take the invitation God gave Cain and Cain refused. Let's let Him search us.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.

Psalms 139:23-24

That everlasting path is the ancient path. It's a path for brothers and sisters, not rivals, and there's room on it for everyone.

For the Road

1. Whose success has been hardest for you to celebrate? What might God be testing in your heart through it?
2. Where have you heard God's correction as rejection? What would it look like to hear it as an open door?
3. In what area of your life are you chasing "the best" instead of giving your best?

God isn't asking you to be the best. He's asking you to bring your best and to bless your brother.

PART THREE

The Prodigal Bride

How does the Bride come home?

Chapter 10

The Prodigal Bride

Then the LORD said to me, “Go and love your wife again, even though she commits adultery with another lover. This will illustrate that the LORD still loves Israel, even though the people have turned to other gods and love to worship them.”

Hosea 3:1

Everybody knows the story of the prodigal son. Fewer of us have noticed the prodigal Bride.

The old dictionaries define a prodigal as “one that expends money extravagantly or without necessity; a waster; a spendthrift.” The prodigal son spent his inheritance. The prodigal Bride spends something more precious. She spends her love, her worship and her devotion on lovers who can’t love her back.

I really believe we’re living in a Hosea season in the Body of Christ. God wants to promote us from sonship to bride-ship. Sons learn that the Father loves them. A bride learns how His heart breaks when she wanders. The Church has preached a lot about the first. She has felt very little of the second.

This chapter is about how the Bride wandered, the lies she started to believe about her Husband while she was gone, and the stunning way He brings her home.

**Sons learn that the Father loves them. A bride learns how
His heart breaks.**

A Hosea Season

Hosea has been called the deathbed prophet of Israel. He was the last prophet to speak to the northern kingdom before it fell to Assyria around 722 BC. His ministry came right after a golden age, a season of peace and prosperity Israel hadn't seen since the days of Solomon. And with that prosperity came moral decay. The people had more than ever, and they forgot the God who gave it to them.

So God asked His prophet to do something no preacher would put on a ministry résumé.

When the LORD first began speaking to Israel through Hosea, he said to him, "Go and marry a prostitute, so that some of her children will be conceived in prostitution. This will illustrate how Israel has acted like a prostitute by turning against the LORD and worshipping other gods."

Hosea 1:2

Hosea married Gomer. His marriage became a living sermon. Every time she left, every time she came back, every time his heart broke, Israel was watching a picture of what they had done to God.

Notice when this happened: in a season of plenty, while the barns were full. Prosperity didn't prove Israel was faithful. It gave her the means to wander.

**Comfort has led more brides astray than persecution ever
has.**

Three Children, Three Lies

Gomer gave birth to three children, and God named each one.

The first was a son, and God said, “Name the child Jezreel,” a name tied to judgment on the house of Jehu (Hosea 1:4). The second was a daughter, and God said, “Name your daughter Lo-ruhamah—‘Not loved’—for I will no longer show love to the people of Israel or forgive them” (Hosea 1:6). Older translations render her name “No Mercy.” The third was a son: “Name him Lo-ammi—‘Not my people’—for Israel is not my people, and I am not their God” (Hosea 1:9).

Here’s what I see in that passage. When the prodigal son disrespected his father’s wisdom and will, the father said yes to his request. That was the prescription. Many in the Body of Christ fail to recognize that prayer is so powerful God will sometimes say yes to a request we aren’t ready for. And sometimes the consequences of being wise in our own eyes are the best medicine for a heart that doesn’t fear the Lord.

So the prescription for the prodigal Bride was to let her have her way, so she could taste the folly of her ways. She gave birth to three children that didn’t belong to her husband.

The names of those children are the lies we’re tempted to believe about God when we sin and step out from under His protection.

1. **Jezreel: “God punishes.”** The truth is that God disciplines those He loves. “For the LORD corrects those he loves, just as a father corrects a child in whom he delights” (Proverbs 3:12).
2. **Lo-ruhamah: “God has no mercy.”** The truth is that “the LORD is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love” (Psalm 103:8). He “does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent” (2 Peter 3:9).
3. **Lo-ammi: “I’m not His child.”** The truth is that “no one can snatch them from the Father’s hand” (John 10:29).

Each lie has a face in the Gospels.

The punishment perspective sounds like the servant in Jesus' parable who buried his master's money: "Master, I knew you were a harsh man, harvesting crops you didn't plant and gathering crops you didn't cultivate" (Matthew 25:24). He was so sure of a harsh master that he hid. That's what the punishment lie does. It doesn't make us holy. It makes us hide.

The no-mercy perspective was standing in the Temple courts with stones in its hands. The religious leaders dragged a woman caught in adultery in front of Jesus, and He sent every one of them away with a single sentence. Then He turned to her.

Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" "No, Lord," she said. And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

John 8:10-11

The not-His-child perspective whispers, "God has forgotten me." And God answers it through Isaiah: "Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for the child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you!" (Isaiah 49:15).

And here's the part I love. God didn't leave those names on those children. Before the book of Hosea is over, He renames every one of them. Jezreel, the name of scattering, becomes "God plants!" (Hosea 2:22). "I will show love to those I called 'Not loved.' And to those I called 'Not my people,' I will say, 'Now you are my people.' And they will reply, 'You are our God!'" (Hosea 2:23).

The names of the prodigal Bride's children are lies about God. He came to rename every one of them.

Punishment or Discipline

If there's one thing I want you to carry out of this chapter, it's this: punishment and discipline are not the same thing.

Punishment protects others from you. Discipline saves you from yourself.

Punishment protects people from the harm a sinful person would do to them. That's why we have courts and prisons. Discipline protects a sinful person from their own mistakes. That's why we have fathers.

When we confuse the two, we start interpreting every hard season as God's revenge. We hear the Father's correction as rejection, and we run further away from the only One who can heal us. But the writer of Hebrews tells us what the Father is really after: "God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness" (Hebrews 12:10).

A judge sentences you and closes the file. A father disciplines you and keeps the door open. One is finished with you. The other is fighting for you.

The prodigal Bride believed she was being punished. In truth she was being pursued.

A judge closes the file. A father keeps the door open.

Consecration, Compromise, Cowardice

How does a bride drift that far? Almost never in one step. King Asa shows us the slide.

Asa started well. "Asa did what was pleasing and good in the sight of the LORD his God" (2 Chronicles 14:2). He tore down the foreign altars, smashed the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah poles. He

commanded Judah to seek the Lord. When a vast army came against him, he cried out, “O LORD, no one but you can help the powerless against the mighty!” (2 Chronicles 14:11), and God gave him the victory.

Then a prophet named Azariah met him on the road home with a word that should hang over every revival:

*The LORD will stay with you as long as you stay with him!
Whenever you seek him, you will find him. But if you abandon
him, he will abandon you.*

2 Chronicles 15:2

Asa took it to heart. He even removed his own grandmother Maacah from her position as queen mother because she had made an obscene Asherah pole (2 Chronicles 15:16). That’s consecration. Nothing, not even family, was allowed to compete with God.

But years later, when the king of Israel came against him, Asa didn’t cry out to God. He emptied the treasuries of the Temple and his own palace, sent the silver and gold to the king of Aram, and bought himself an ally (2 Chronicles 16:1–3). It worked. The enemy pulled back.

Then God sent Hanani the seer.

*Because you have put your trust in the king of Aram instead of in
the LORD your God, you missed your chance to destroy the army
of the king of Aram... The eyes of the LORD search the whole
earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully
committed to him. What a fool you have been! From now on you
will be at war.*

2 Chronicles 16:7, 9

Asa became so angry that he threw the prophet in prison and began to oppress some of his people (2 Chronicles 16:10). And in the thirty-ninth year of his reign he developed a serious disease in his feet, “yet even with

the severity of his disease, he did not seek the LORD's help but turned only to his physicians" (2 Chronicles 16:12). Scripture never forbids medicine. Asa's problem was a heart that no longer sought God for anything.

Watch the progression. Consecration: he tore down every rival altar. Compromise: he paid the world for the peace God had already promised him. Cowardice: he silenced the voice that told him the truth.

**When you compromise with what you're called to conquer,
it leads to cowardice.**

Jesus said, "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give" (John 14:27). The peace the world gives is based on circumstance and infected with compromise. The peace Jesus gives is an internal perspective, based on objective truth. Asa traded the second for the first, and it cost him the rest of his reign.

I've noticed something about seasons of pain. When life throws you a custom-made cross, you'll be tempted to compromise and believe the lie that you get to write a custom-made commandment to medicate your pain and persecution. That's what Asa did. And we're tempted to do the same, because we often want the power to change our position more than we want the power to change our perspective.

Then there's the word we'd rather skip.

But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.

Revelation 21:8

Look who's first on that list. When we think of evil people, we think of murderers, traffickers and terrorists. We very seldom think of the people

who love the praise of men more than the praise of a holy God. But simply put, a coward is a person who is more afraid to offend man than to offend God.

A coward is someone more afraid to offend people than to offend God.

Catherine Booth, who co-founded The Salvation Army, put it this way: “When the Church and the world can jog comfortably together, you may be sure there is something wrong.” What’s best for my personal comfort and happiness isn’t always what’s best for the Kingdom of God to be established and to flourish.

Prodigal or Consecrated?

In earlier books I’ve written about the two brides that will rise in the last days, one married to the world and one consecrated to the Bridegroom King. I won’t repeat that list here. Instead, I want to show you that there are really three hearts in the house, not two. Here’s how I teach it.

The prodigal Bride

is married to the world. She trades purity for popularity and calls compromise freedom. Picture a worship leader with a growing following who quietly starts softening the lyrics and skipping the songs about sin and the cross, because “they don’t stream as well.” Paul had already answered that temptation: “If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ’s servant” (Galatians 1:10).

The obedient bride who is not in love

does the right things out of fear of the consequences. This is the quieter danger, and it’s the older brother in Jesus’ story. Did the older brother obey the father? Yes. He was doing all the right things with the wrong heart.

Picture two people tempted to do wrong. A little boy wants to steal something but doesn't, because he doesn't want to get in trouble. A grown man wants to cheat on his wife but doesn't, because he's afraid of getting caught and losing the house. What's wrong with this picture? Both of them obeyed. The boy is simply learning about consequences, which is where every child starts. But the man has a distorted heart, and the only thing standing between him and adultery is the fear of exposure.

Self-righteous works are about the mind, while true obedience is about holiness and the heart. Don't just ask, "Is this allowed?" Ask, "Does this please Him?" God said it plainly through Hosea: "I want you to show love, not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me more than I want burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6).

I truly believe God is tired of the gifts of church attendance, tithing out of fear, conference after conference and worship concerts. He wants us. He wants our hearts.

The consecrated Bride

is set apart and devoted to Jesus out of love. The old dictionaries define consecration as separating something from a common use to a sacred one, devoting and dedicating it to the service and worship of God. Consecration doesn't make us holy. Jesus does that. Consecration declares that we belong to Him. Picture a young woman who deletes the dating app and the shows that kept pulling her away, not because anyone told her to, but because she doesn't want anything competing with her time with Jesus. Or a woman passed over for the promotion she was promised, who still worships on Sunday, keeps serving quietly, and tells God, "Even if this never changes, You are my reward."

What separates these three hearts? Not effort. All three are disciplined.

It takes just as much discipline to hide sin as it does to be delivered from it. The only difference is what has captured

your heart.

The Bridegroom Who Comes Looking

Here's the most beautiful difference between the two prodigal stories.

The prodigal son had to walk home. He came to his senses in a pig pen and made the long trip back to his father's house. But the prodigal Bride, broken and crushed in spirit, didn't make the trip by herself. The Bridegroom went out to find her.

God told Hosea, "Go and love your wife again" (Hosea 3:1). Gomer had wandered so far into the life she chose that Hosea had to buy her back, for fifteen pieces of silver and some barley (Hosea 3:2). He paid for a bride who already belonged to him.

That's the gospel. "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed" (Psalm 34:18). The path home for the Bride wasn't an act of works. It was the inward posture of a heart that had come to the end of herself.

Jesus did the same thing at a well in Samaria. He sat down with a woman who had been through five husbands and was living with a man who wasn't her husband, and He offered her living water (John 4:7-18). He didn't shame her. He told her the truth and offered her Himself.

So let me ask you plainly. Is Jesus the One you visit when it's convenient, or is He your Bridegroom, "outstanding among ten thousand" (Song of Songs 5:10, NIV)?

Wherever you've wandered, hear this. The One you left is on the road, coming for you, with the price already paid.

The prodigal son walked home. The prodigal Bride was carried home by the Bridegroom who came looking for her.

For the Road

1. Which of the three lies (God punishes, God has no mercy, I'm not His child) have you been tempted to believe in a season of failure?
2. Where do you see Asa's slide in your own life: a peace you bought from the world instead of receiving from God, or a voice you've silenced because it told you the truth?
3. Of the three hearts (prodigal, obedient but not in love, consecrated), which one most honestly describes you right now? What would it look like to let love become the reason?

The Bridegroom isn't waiting for His Bride to clean herself up. He's already on the road to bring her home.

Chapter 11

Fathered All Along

Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD will hold me close.

Psalm 27:10

In the last chapter we looked at the lies the prodigal Bride believes about God while she's away from home: God punishes, God has no mercy, I'm not His child. But there's one lie underneath all of them, and I've watched it keep more people from coming home than any other.

It's the lie that says God is just like my father.

If your earthly father was distant, you assume God is distant. If he was harsh, you brace for God's hand. If he only noticed you when you performed, you spend your whole life performing for heaven. We don't usually say it out loud. We just live it.

I know that lie well, because I grew up inside it. And God used a kids' movie about elves to show me what had been true the whole time.

The ancient path doesn't lead back to a religion. It leads back to a Father.

A World That Forgot Its Magic

Pixar's *Onward* opens in a world that used to be full of wonder. There were wizards, quests and real power. But magic was hard to learn and slow to master, so over time people traded it in. Lightbulbs were easier

than spells. Cars were faster than journeys. Eventually nobody remembered what they used to be capable of.

The only one still holding on to the old ways is Barley, the loud, messy older brother everybody treats like a joke. He plays a game built on the old history and talks about quests like they're real. People roll their eyes at him.

That's us, isn't it? We've swapped the slow, costly pursuit of God for things that work faster: a quick prayer, a podcast, a feeling on Sunday. The few who still talk about wrestling with God, waiting on Him and walking the old paths can come across as a little out of step.

But in the movie, those "outdated" ways turn out to be the only road that leads to the father.

**The old ways look foolish right up until they're the only
road home.**

Risking It All for One More Day

Ian and Barley lost their dad before Ian was born. On Ian's sixteenth birthday they receive a gift their father left behind: a staff and a spell that can bring him back for one day. The spell goes wrong, and only half of him comes back. Just his legs. So the brothers set out on a quest to finish it before the sun goes down.

What gets me is how much they're willing to go through. They break rules, take wrong turns, get chased, get cursed, and end up facing down a dragon. All for a few minutes with their father.

That's the story all through Scripture. The people who truly encountered God usually went after Him at great cost.

- **Moses** had already seen the plagues and the sea split open, and he still asked for more: "Then show me your glorious presence" (Exodus

33:18).

- **Jacob** wrestled all night and refused to let go: “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Genesis 32:26). He walked away limping, and he walked away changed.
- **Zacchaeus**, a grown man and a wealthy one, climbed a tree like a kid just to see Jesus pass by (Luke 19:1–4).
- **The woman who had bled for twelve years** pushed through a crowd that didn’t want her there, just to touch His robe (Mark 5:25–28).

God “rewards those who sincerely seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). These people sought Him like their lives depended on it, because they did.

Encounter is found by people who won’t settle for a substitute.

My Father

I understand Ian’s ache, because I grew up with a father who was there and not there at the same time.

Sometimes he wouldn’t come home for weeks. He was always giving to other people, always showing up for someone else, while our own family struggled. We felt it financially, and we felt it even more emotionally. There were days he was home and still didn’t pick me up from school. He was too busy. I’d wait, and eventually figure out he wasn’t coming.

His discipline was heavy, and at times it pushed past discipline into something darker. I still remember him throwing me into a sliding glass door. By the grace of God the glass didn’t break. But something in me did.

I played sports, and for years he didn’t come and didn’t ask. It wasn’t until I earned a full scholarship that he showed any real interest. That taught me a lie I carried for a long time: love is something you perform for. If you’re good enough, maybe then you’ll be seen.

Then, as an adult, I found out things about my father that I can't share here, because those stories belong to the people he hurt. I'll only say this: what I learned was worse than anything I had imagined as a kid. It explained a lot, and it broke my heart all over again.

That's the kind of discovery that can wreck how a person sees God. If your earthly father was distant, harsh and hiding things, it's easy to assume your heavenly Father must be too. A lot of people walk away from God for exactly that reason. I understand why.

**A distant father can teach you to perform for a love that
was never for sale.**

The Moment It Clicked

The turning point came from an unlikely place. I was watching *Star Wars*, the famous scene where Luke Skywalker finds out the villain he's been fighting is his own father. Luke is crushed. Everything he believed about where he came from falls apart in a single moment.

I knew that feeling. I'd had my own version of it when I learned the truth about my dad.

But watching it this time, something different rose up in me. Not hopelessness. Joy.

I realized that the father I had imagined my dad to be when I was growing up, the one I kept hoping was in there somewhere, was real. He just wasn't my dad. He was the man God had been forming in me. The strength, the faithfulness and the presence I always wanted from my father, God had been building into me the whole time.

I hadn't been fatherless. I had been fathered by God all along.

That's when Psalm 27:10 stopped being a nice verse and became my testimony: "Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD will

hold me close.”

I wasn’t fatherless. I was fathered by God the whole time.

The List

(If you haven’t seen Onward, here’s your spoiler warning.)

Throughout the quest, Ian carries a list of things he always wished he could do with his dad. Play catch. Learn to drive. Laugh together. Share his life with him. Near the end, when it looks like he might not get his moment after all, Ian looks back over that list and realizes something. His big brother had already done every one of those things with him.

Barley had been fathering him the whole time.

When the moment finally comes, Ian steps aside and lets Barley have the time with their dad, because Ian already has what he was looking for.

I can’t watch that without thinking of Philip. He had walked with Jesus for years when he asked for the one thing he still felt he was missing.

Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”

Jesus replied, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don’t know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!”

John 14:8–9

Philip was searching for the Father, and the Father had been revealed right beside him the whole time.

Scripture calls Jesus “the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” (Romans 8:29), and it says He “is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters” (Hebrews 2:11). Jesus is our elder Brother. He walks the hard road with us, and as we go, He shows us what the Father is really like: present, patient, faithful and kind. Everything my earthly father wasn’t.

Jesus is the elder Brother who walks the road with us and shows us the Father on the way.

Walking the Old Path Home

I want to be honest about where things stand today. My relationship with my earthly father has distance and boundaries in it, because of sin in his past and present that he isn't willing to give up. Boundaries aren't the opposite of love. Sometimes they're how love protects what God is healing. Scripture says, "Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). Notice the words "all that you can." Peace takes two people, and I can't choose for him.

But here's what I've learned. My healing was never waiting on him. The Father I needed was never missing. He was there in the empty pickup line after school, in the glass door that didn't shatter, in the games nobody came to watch. He was fathering me through every one of them.

That's what the ancient path really is. It isn't a set of religious habits. It's the old way back to the Father who was there before every disappointment and will still be there after.

So go after Him the way Moses, Jacob, Zacchaeus and that desperate woman in the crowd did. He's worth it. But when you do, don't be surprised if you find what Ian found. The One you were desperate to meet had been walking beside you the whole way. The journey wasn't wasted. It's what finally opened your eyes.

For the Road

1. How has your relationship with your earthly father shaped the way you see your heavenly Father?
2. Where have you been performing for a love that was already freely given?

3. Looking back, where can you see that God was fathering you, even in seasons you felt alone? Who has He placed beside you, like Barley, to show you His heart?

**The Father you were searching for has been walking
beside you the whole way.**

Chapter 12

Letters to Seven Churches

Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.

Revelation 3:22

Jesus wrote seven letters to seven churches, and five of them were rebuked.

Let that sink in. These weren't letters to pagan temples. They were letters to congregations that met in His name, sang His songs and preached His Word. And to most of them, the One who "walks among the seven gold lampstands" (Revelation 2:1) said, in effect, "I see what you can't see about yourself."

In *The Mystery of the Pain* I wrote about learning to pray, "Lord, judge me now." The letters in Revelation 2 and 3 are that prayer answered in advance. Again and again He begins the same way: "I know all the things you do." Jesus isn't guessing. He's holding up a mirror.

That's how I want you to read this chapter. Not as a way to diagnose the church down the street, but as a mirror for your own heart and your own house. I call this teaching "Driven by Eternity: Seven Types of Churches, One Thing to Seek." Because if we let Him judge us now, we won't be surprised later.

The letters to the seven churches are a mirror, not a weapon.

Ephesus and Smyrna: Lost Love and Rich Poverty

Ephesus: hard work, but a lost first love.

I call this the sin of moralism and the ministry church. Jesus commended them for a lot. “I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don’t tolerate evil people” (Revelation 2:2). They tested false apostles and exposed them. They had sound doctrine and strong work ethic. Then came the line no busy church wants to hear.

But I have this complaint against you. You don’t love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don’t repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches.

Revelation 2:4–5

Picture a church that runs a food pantry and three weekly Bible studies and guards its doctrine carefully. But its prayer meeting has quietly died, and no one talks about loving Jesus anymore. Or picture a pastor who works seventy-hour weeks for the ministry. When his wife asks when he last spent time alone with God just to enjoy Him, he can’t remember.

That’s Ephesus: ministry that outlived the love that started it. Martha was busy serving, but Mary discovered the one thing worth being concerned about (Luke 10:41–42). The cure is simple and humbling. Go back to what first set your heart on fire, and do the works of love you did at first.

You can keep the doctrine and lose the Bridegroom.

Smyrna: persecuted and poor, yet rich.

I call it the remnant and the persecuted church. Jesus didn’t rebuke Smyrna at all. “I know about your suffering and your poverty—but you

are rich!” (Revelation 2:9). Then He told them more suffering was coming, and gave them a promise: “If you remain faithful even when facing death, I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

Picture believers in a closed country who lose their jobs and homes for meeting to worship, but whose gatherings are full of joy and keep growing. Or picture it in miniature: a student mocked and left out for refusing to lie on a group project, who stays kind, keeps her work honest and keeps her faith.

Smyrna had nothing the world counts as success, and Jesus called them rich.

Faithfulness, not comfort, is true wealth.

Pergamum and Thyatira: Compromise and Untethered Empathy

Pergamum: compromise for control.

Jesus said, “I know that you live in the city where Satan has his throne, yet you have remained loyal to me” (Revelation 2:13). They held fast to His name under real pressure. But some among them held to the teaching of Balaam (Revelation 2:14), the prophet-for-hire who taught Israel’s enemies how to bring down what he couldn’t curse. Balaam’s way is to bless what God hasn’t blessed, for a price (2 Peter 2:15).

Picture a ministry leader who stays silent about a major donor’s open immorality, because the donor funds half the budget and sits on the board. Or a pastor who stops preaching on anything a powerful network of churches considers “divisive,” so he can stay in good standing.

Forging friendships with the hidden motive of gaining visibility and influence is idolatry. Pergamum didn’t deny the name of Jesus. It simply sold its voice to keep its seat at the table. The Spirit’s word to Pergamum

is direct: name the compromise you've made to keep your influence, and break that alliance.

Thyatira: untethered empathy that tolerates Jezebel.

This church may surprise you, because Jesus praised it lavishly. "I have seen your love, your faith, your service, and your patient endurance. And I can see your constant improvement in all these things" (Revelation 2:19). And then:

But I have this complaint against you. You are permitting that woman—that Jezebel who calls herself a prophet—to lead my servants astray.

Revelation 2:20

Thyatira was loving, serving and growing, and it was tolerating what was destroying its people. Picture a small group leader who knows a member is sleeping around and teaching others that sin doesn't matter, but says nothing because "I don't want her to feel judged." Or a church famous for its compassion ministries, where anyone who raises concerns about sin among the leaders is told they're being "unloving."

I call that untethered empathy. It's compassion that has come loose from truth.

Truth without empathy is offensive, but empathy without truth is a lie.

Love that refuses to confront what is destroying people isn't love. Even Jezebel was given "time to repent" (Revelation 2:21). Real love tells the truth while there's still time.

Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea: Reputation, Weakness and Success

Sardis: reputation over character.

“I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead. Wake up!” (Revelation 3:1–2). Sardis had a name. It had a history. It may have had a full calendar. But it was dying, and only Jesus could see it.

Picture a church with a famous name, packed conferences and a history of revival, whose leaders haven’t prayed together in years. Or a man who posts a Bible verse every day and is known as “the godly one” at work, but at home is angry, distant and glued to his phone. Paul warned of people who “will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly” (2 Timothy 3:5).

Even in Sardis, though, Jesus found a few “who have not soiled their clothes with evil” (Revelation 3:4). There’s always a remnant. The Spirit’s word to Sardis is: stop managing your image. Ask God where you’ve fallen asleep, and wake up.

A reputation can stay alive long after the life is gone.

Philadelphia: little strength, yet faithful.

I call it the strength-in-weakness church, the poor-in-spirit church. Jesus had no rebuke for them. “I have opened a door for you that no one can close. You have little strength, yet you obeyed my word and did not deny me” (Revelation 3:8).

Picture a tiny church in a hard neighborhood with no budget and no building, that keeps preaching the gospel, visiting prisoners and praying every night. Or a woman who, after a long illness, can barely leave her

house, but prays for her church every morning and texts Scripture to young moms.

The world would never put Philadelphia on a conference stage. Jesus opened a door for them that no one could shut. “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Your weakness is a doorway to His power.

Laodicea: success over surrender.

This is the letter we know best and like least.

I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other! But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth!

Revelation 3:15–16

Picture a wealthy church that says, “We’ve never been more blessed,” while its members haven’t shared their faith, fasted or sacrificed anything in years. Or a man who goes to church most Sundays, is never too hot or too cold about anything to do with God, and doesn’t see why anyone gets so worked up.

Laodicea traded surrender for success, and the trade made it lukewarm. But listen to how Jesus speaks to the most rebuked church of all: “I correct and discipline everyone I love. So be diligent and turn from your indifference” (Revelation 3:19). Even the rebuke is a love letter. And then the most famous invitation in the book: “Look! I stand at the door and knock” (Revelation 3:20). He was standing outside His own church, asking to come in.

Laodicea had everything except the One knocking at the door.

One Thing to Seek

Seven churches. Seven conditions. But there's one thing to seek through them all.

The one thing I ask of the LORD—the thing I seek most—is to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, delighting in the LORD's perfections and meditating in his Temple.

Psalm 27:4

Every rebuke in these letters is a call back to that one thing. Ephesus lost it in busyness. Pergamum traded it for influence. Thyatira replaced it with niceness. Sardis covered its absence with a reputation. Laodicea forgot it needed it at all. Smyrna and Philadelphia had almost nothing else, and Jesus didn't rebuke them.

So hold up the mirror. Read these slowly, and let the Spirit answer.

1. **Ephesus:** Has my work for God outlived my love for God?
2. **Smyrna:** Am I measuring my wealth by comfort, or by faithfulness?
3. **Pergamum:** What compromise have I made to keep my influence?
4. **Thyatira:** Where has my empathy come loose from the truth?
5. **Sardis:** Is my reputation more alive than my spirit?
6. **Philadelphia:** Will I keep His word even when I have little strength?
7. **Laodicea:** Has success made me lukewarm?

Five of the seven churches were rebuked, and every rebuke was a call back to one thing.

Whose Oil Is It?

There's an old saying: "If you have read the Word of God, then you have heard the voice of God." I understand why people say it. But Jesus said

something to the Pharisees, men who had memorized the Torah, that should stop us in our tracks.

And the Father who sent me has testified about me himself. You have never heard his voice or seen him face to face, and you do not have his message in your hearts, because you do not believe me—the one he sent to you.

John 5:37–38

Those who memorized the written Word came to crucify the Living Word. Head knowledge has never transformed a sinner into a saint.

That’s why the deepest question behind the seven letters isn’t “How is my church doing?” It’s “Whose oil is burning in my lamp?” Here’s how I teach the four answers.

1. Head knowledge: knowing the Scriptures without coming to

Him. Picture a woman who can quote the whole book of Romans and wins every theology debate in her small group, but hasn’t prayed on her own in months. Or a man who says, “I read my chapter every morning so I can check it off the plan. I couldn’t tell you what God said to me through it.” The Scriptures were never the destination. They point to Him. Before you read, pray, “Lord, I don’t want information. I want You.” Then read until you meet Him.

2. A fan’s closeness: sermons and worship consumed like

entertainment. You can watch a movie and feel close to an actor, yet never have met him. Picture a youth group that travels to every big conference and knows every famous worship leader’s story, but when they get home, none of them has a prayer life. That’s being a fan of a move of God instead of a friend of God. It’s why Jesus will one day say to people who prophesied and did miracles in His name, “I never knew you” (Matthew 7:23). Turn off the playlist and talk to Him yourself for ten minutes today. Then listen.

3. Borrowed oil: living off someone else's revelation. "My mom is a prayer warrior," he says. "She's got me covered." He hasn't prayed for himself in years. Or picture a young man whose faith went quiet when his mentor moved away: "He was the one who always heard from God." When Elijah was taken up, Elisha picked up the cloak, struck the water himself, and cried out, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" (2 Kings 2:14). Thank God for those who pray for you, but don't make them your only connection to Him.

4. Your own oil: a personal walk and fresh encounter with God.

Picture a woman who, before big decisions at work, gets alone with God, reads the Word until she hears Him, and writes down what He says. Or a father who grew up on his parents' faith and starts waking early to meet God for himself, so his kids will see a faith that's truly his. That's how faith passes down: firsthand, the way it lived in Lois, then Eunice, then Timothy (2 Timothy 1:5). "Taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8). Keep it fresh. Meet Him daily, not just on Sundays.

We'll come back to lamps and oil at the very end of this book. For now, hear the heart of it. Each of the seven churches stood before Jesus on its own, and so will you. The oil in your lamp has to be your own.

But here's the good news. Every one of these letters ends with a promise "to everyone who is victorious": the tree of life, freedom from the second death, hidden manna, the morning star, white clothes, a pillar in God's Temple, a seat with Jesus on His throne. He didn't write to them to shame them. He wrote to bring them home.

Borrowed oil runs out when the lender leaves. Your own oil comes from sitting with Him.

For the Road

1. Which of the seven churches looks most like you right now? Which looks most like the church you're part of?
2. Look at the seven mirror questions. Which one did you want to skip? Ask the Spirit what He's saying to you about it.
3. Whose oil is burning in your lamp: head knowledge, a fan's closeness, borrowed oil, or your own? What's one step you can take this week toward a firsthand walk with God?

**Jesus still walks among the lampstands, and He writes to
His Church because He loves her.**

Chapter 13

Reformers and Retainers

All these men understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take.

1 Chronicles 12:32

Many in the Body of Christ long for the baby called revival, but they reject the necessary process of refinement and repentance because of the daily cost of discipleship. They want the privileges of power and prestige without shouldering the responsibilities that come with leading as fathers and mothers of reformation.

That's the gap this chapter is about.

Every move of God in history has needed two kinds of people. It has needed people who would push forward into ground the Church had lost, and people who would stand on that ground and keep it. When those two kinds of people honor each other, the Kingdom advances and stays advanced. When they despise each other, the Church either stalls or slides backward.

The Prodigal Bride is coming home. Now the question is who will lead her, and what kind of house she'll find when she gets there.

Revival is a birth. Reformation is the raising of the child.

Two Callings, One Mission

Here is how I would define them.

Reformers

confront generational drift in the Church to restore God's original intent for His Body. They are professors of justice and truth. They challenge, point the way, dismantle compromises and provoke necessary, often disruptive, change. They call for renewal through the cost of discipleship, through prayer, through prophetic voices, and by challenging the saints to live for a generation they will not see.

Retainers

preserve what reform achieved in past generations. They maintain doctrinal integrity, protect the culture God built, and prevent a slow surrender to the culture around us. They do it through teaching and encouragement, and they are often cultivators of mercy and grace.

Reformers advance the front lines; retainers hold them.

The trouble starts when the two don't value each other's mission. Reformers accuse retainers of being stagnant. Retainers accuse reformers of being too intense. But a healthy movement needs both: one to restore alignment with the ancient paths, the other to secure faithfulness for the next generation.

Without reformers the Church stagnates. Without retainers it relapses.

The real question in any given moment is which one the moment needs. Picture a few of them.

A revival broke out last year. The excitement is fading and the new believers are drifting. The temptation is to push for the next big move with fresh vision and new events. But this moment needs a retainer: someone to disciple the new believers, teach sound doctrine and protect what God started. Without retainers, revival relapses.

A program in your ministry no longer bears fruit, but people are attached to it. Keeping it alive because people love it is mourning Saul. This moment needs a reformer. But cancel it overnight and tell everyone to get over it, and you'll wound the people you're trying to lead. Retire it lovingly, and make room for what God is doing now.

A healthy, fruitful ministry is handed to you by a leader who's retiring. You don't need to overhaul everything with your own vision. Learn its history, keep what God built, and steward it faithfully. Not every new season requires tearing down.

In every one of those moments there's a third option that sounds almost right: the critical spirit. It points out the pride in others to avoid its own correction. It leaves the church and posts online about everything that's wrong. It criticizes the leaders for losing the fire. The critical spirit masquerades as discernment, but accusation has never reformed anything. It's a standard of truth with no honor for anyone's process, and that's idealism.

Preserving compromise isn't faithfulness. Tearing down without honor isn't reformation. Moses spoke of one chasing a thousand and two putting ten thousand to flight (Deuteronomy 32:30). The healthiest people I know have learned to be both: reformers in the areas God is confronting, retainers in the areas God has already built.

A critical spirit is the counterfeit of both callings.

Deconstruction or Reformation?

Many today describe what they're going through as "deconstruction." It can sound a lot like reformation, so you have to listen for what is being put on trial.

Deconstruction challenges the Word of God. Reformation questions the traditions of men.

Jesus was a reformer in exactly this sense. He never put His Father's Word on trial. He put the traditions on trial: "For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition" (Mark 7:8). When He flipped tables in the temple, He was restoring His Father's house to its purpose, not tearing down the house.

Listen to the difference. "Why do we treat our pastor like a celebrity? Jesus said the greatest among us would be a servant." That's reformation. It tests a tradition by the Word. "We measure success by attendance and offerings. Shouldn't we measure it by disciples?" Reformation again. Somewhere the church stopped asking what it means to be faithful and started asking what it means to be successful.

Now listen to the other voice. "How can we say the Bible is perfect when some parts feel outdated?" "Feels outdated" measures God's Word by the culture. "Who's to say what sin is anymore? Everyone has their own truth." That makes truth a personal opinion. "I've outgrown the Jesus I grew up with. To me He's just a great moral teacher now." That puts Christ Himself on trial.

Honest questions brought to God are always welcome. The Psalms are full of them. But faith asks, and then it bows. Deconstruction makes my questions the judge of God's Word instead of His Word the judge of my questions.

Jesus replied, "Your mistake is that you don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God."

Matthew 22:29

Some of the hardest deconstruction is born in grief. "I prayed, and my mom still died. Maybe God isn't as good as the Bible says." Pour out your pain. Jesus Himself cried, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" But don't lower your theology to match your pain. Jeremiah wrote, "Everything I had hoped for from the LORD is lost!" and a few lines later,

“Yet I still dare to hope” (Lamentations 3:18, 21). A season like that calls for a retainer: hold on to the truths you know while you grieve.

And true reformation always starts at home. “Before I criticize the church again, I need to deal with the plank in my own eye.” That’s a reformer talking. Reformation begins with “Search me, O God, and know my heart” (Psalm 139:23).

Some reformation starts with deconstruction, but not all deconstruction leads to reformation.

Break the Cycle

A Parable for the Church

That examination reaches beyond our doctrines into our preferences. Sometimes the tradition we defend most fiercely is simply the way we expect truth to sound. A song can expose that difference before a sermon ever does.

For Today’s “Break the Cycle” becomes a parable for me. It’s metalcore: distorted guitars, pounding drums, screamed vocals. Many church folks would switch it off within ten seconds. Yet I hear in its message a call to wake up, turn from dead routine, and break the patterns that keep us bound.

That is the parable. Many of us pray, “Lord, sing a new song over Your church.” We quote Psalm 96:1 and ask for revival. But what happens when a call to repentance comes in a sound we would never choose for Sunday morning? It is loud, raw and unfamiliar, and we are offended. We judge the sound before we hear the message.

Jesus challenged that habit of letting familiar traditions decide what people would receive. He warned, “You ignore God’s law and

substitute your own tradition” (Mark 7:8, NLT). He also said no one puts new wine into old wineskins, or the skins burst (Mark 2:22). His picture confronts our attempt to contain what He is doing within forms that cannot receive it.

An unfamiliar sound is not automatically from God. Neither is familiarity proof of His approval. We must test the message by Scripture and examine its fruit. The question is whether our objection comes from faithfulness to God’s Word or attachment to our own preferences.

The church has a cycle of its own: comfort, routine, form without power. Paul warned of people who “act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly” (2 Timothy 3:5, NLT). We can sing every familiar hymn and still be stuck in that cycle. We can change the music and remain stuck as well. The change God seeks reaches the heart.

So here is the question. Will we cling to the traditions of men because they sound like home? Or will we receive a scripturally faithful call to repentance even when its delivery makes us uncomfortable?

A bride preparing for her Groom makes herself ready (Revelation 19:7). That preparation requires surrender, including the willingness to let God challenge our preferences so He can heal our hearts. Breaking the cycle begins when obedience matters more than comfort.

The new song may already be playing. The question is whether we will listen past the sound and discern what agrees with the Spirit and the Word.

That response reveals more than our musical taste. It reveals how we handle freedom, correction and truth. Some use freedom to excuse rebellion. Some protect religious form while resisting the power that would change them. Others discern what God is saying and obey. Scripture gives us pictures of all three.

A Tale of Three Sons

The last-days Church holds three kinds of sons side by side, in the same pews, singing the same songs.

1. The sons of Eli: the rebellious spirit. Access without reverence. Hophni and Phinehas served at the altar every day, yet “the sons of Eli were scoundrels who had no respect for the LORD” (1 Samuel 2:12). They took the best of the offerings for themselves. I’ve written before about Eli’s house and the Ichabod that followed. The spirit of it is still with us: ministry without holiness, freedom without reverence, a gift so valuable it’s kept on the stage no matter what it’s doing offstage.

2. The sons of the Pharisees: the religious spirit. Form without power. They look fine on the outside and hide what’s inside, like whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23:27). They keep score of other people’s sins. They make rules for everyone else and exempt themselves. Paul described the type: “They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly” (2 Timothy 3:5).

3. The sons of Issachar: the remnant. Discernment joined to action. They “understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take” (1 Chronicles 12:32). They don’t just read the moment. They obey in it.

Rebellion pushes the boundaries. Religion builds walls. The remnant discerns the times and obeys.

The rebellious spirit defiles the altar. The religious spirit guards an empty one.

Picture a church where a gifted worship leader keeps sinning openly, and the people are split over what to do. The sons of Eli say, “Keep him on stage. Everyone falls, and his gift is too valuable to lose.” That was Eli’s failure. He rebuked his sons, but he never removed them (1 Samuel 3:13). The sons of the Pharisees say, “Remove him and name his sin from the pulpit as a warning to everyone.” That’s exposure without restoration. The sons of Issachar support loving discipline that removes him from the platform, with a path back. Paul said to “gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path” (Galatians 6:1).

Here is the hope in this story. Samuel grew up in Eli’s house without becoming like it. “As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him” (1 Samuel 3:19). You may serve in a house that has drifted. That doesn’t mean you have to drift with it.

Being in the house isn’t the same as knowing Him. So the question every one of us has to answer is simple: which son am I becoming?

Hezekiah Syndrome

Hezekiah was one of the great reformers of Israel. He tore down idols, reopened the Temple and restored the Passover. But at the end of his life, he showed the treasures of his kingdom to envoys from Babylon. Isaiah came with a sobering word: one day everything in his palace would be carried off to Babylon, and some of his own descendants would be taken away with it (2 Kings 20:16–18).

Listen to how the reformer responded.

Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “This message you have given me from the LORD is good.” For the king was thinking, “At least there will be peace and security during my lifetime.”

2 Kings 20:19

That is Hezekiah syndrome: peace in my own days, and whatever comes after me is someone else’s problem.

Earlier in his life God had added fifteen years to Hezekiah’s life (2 Kings 20:6). His son Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king (2 Kings 21:1), which means he was born during those borrowed years. Manasseh rebuilt the very idols his father had torn down. A reformer who stopped thinking about the next generation raised one of the worst kings Judah ever had.

Hezekiah syndrome is all over the Church. It’s the leader who builds a ministry that can’t survive without him. It’s the believer who is content to be blessed and never asks what they’re leaving behind.

Good people leave an inheritance to their grandchildren.

Proverbs 13:22

Hezekiah syndrome asks, “Will I have peace?” A father asks, “Will my children’s children have it?”

Living for a Generation You Will Not See

David had it in his heart to build a house for the presence of God. God told him no: “You must not build a Temple to honor my name, for you are a warrior and have shed much blood” (1 Chronicles 28:3).

What David did next tells you everything about his heart. He didn’t sulk, and he didn’t build himself a monument instead. He gathered materials. He drew up the designs. “Then David gave Solomon the plans for the

Temple” (1 Chronicles 28:11). David spent the end of his life preparing a house he would never walk into, for a son who would get the credit.

That is what reformers do. They challenge the saints to live for a generation they will not see.

The heroes of faith lived the same way. “All these people died still believing what God had promised them. They did not receive what was promised, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed it” (Hebrews 11:13).

Self-sacrifice is the seed of every true reformation. Every lasting work of God can be traced back to someone who gave up something they would never get back. Paul told the Philippians to have the same mindset as Jesus, who “gave up his divine privileges” and “humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross” (Philippians 2:7–8).

A reformer measures his life by what outlives him.

The Favorite Wife

Malachi promised that the hearts of the fathers would turn to their children. That’s where the Love Reformation lives, and it’s where the enemy aims first.

When a man is distracted and a woman is discouraged, the enemy destroys.

During a trip to Africa, I saw the practice of multiple marriages and how much it shaped family life. A couple of years later, I met a man from Uganda who helped me understand what I had seen. He explained how Christianity there is influenced by cultural norms that conflict with biblical truth. Then he told me something I’ve never forgotten. In families with multiple wives, he said, it’s usually easy to tell which wife is the

husband's favorite. You just look for the children who carry the most confidence.

I would have assumed that children get their confidence from attention and gifts. This pointed to a deeper source: confidence born from the father's love shown toward their mother.

The love a father and mother show each other is the most powerful sermon their children will ever hear. It shapes how they see love, relationships and the world around them. "For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her" (Ephesians 5:25).

**Children draw their confidence from how their father
loves their mother.**

Four Counterfeits, Four Callings

"People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). The world has its own picture of what makes a man, and every part of it is something you can see.

- **Success.** The world measures it by status, power and achievement. The Kingdom measures it by faithfulness. Joseph's greatest success was using his position to save others.
- **Sexual conquest.** The world counts conquests. The Kingdom measures a man by the depth of his commitment. Boaz treated Ruth with honor before he ever called her his wife.
- **Athleticism.** "Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better" (1 Timothy 4:8). David could kill a lion and a giant, but what God recorded about him was his heart.
- **Wealth.** The world measures worth by what a man owns. The Kingdom measures it by what he gives. Zacchaeus's encounter with Jesus showed up first in what he gave away.

Those are counterfeits. Here is the real thing. These four callings were first written for men, and fathers carry a unique weight in them, but every spiritual mother will recognize her own call here too.

1. **Protector: the watchman.** “Now, son of man, I am making you a watchman for the people of Israel” (Ezekiel 33:7). A protector stays alert to what threatens his family and community, physically and spiritually. Nehemiah’s builders worked with materials in one hand and a weapon in the other (Nehemiah 4:17), and he wrote, “But we prayed to our God and guarded the city day and night” (Nehemiah 4:9).
2. **Provider: the steward.** “Those who won’t care for their relatives, especially those in their own household, have denied the true faith” (1 Timothy 5:8). Provision is more than a paycheck. It’s emotional and spiritual covering, and it reaches past your own lifetime to an inheritance for your grandchildren.
3. **Priest: the intercessor.** Job rose early to offer sacrifices for each of his children, in case they had sinned in their hearts. “This was Job’s regular practice” (Job 1:5). A priest carries his family to God before he carries God to his family.
4. **Prophet: the ambassador.** “So we are Christ’s ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20). A prophet in his home represents the truth and love of God in what he says and how he lives, so his children hear the Father’s voice before the world’s.

God is still looking for one. “I looked for someone who might rebuild the wall of righteousness that guards the land. I searched for someone to stand in the gap” (Ezekiel 22:30). That search hasn’t ended. The Love Reformation won’t be led by famous names. It will be led by protectors, providers, priests and prophets whose names you’ll never know, raising sons and daughters in homes where the Father’s love is visible.

**One faithful father can stand in a gap a whole generation
left open.**

For the Road

1. In the area of life God is dealing with you right now, does the moment need you to be a reformer or a retainer? Where has a critical spirit been posing as either one?
2. Which son are you becoming: the son of Eli, the son of the Pharisees, or the son of Issachar? What would the people closest to you say?
3. Where are you settling for “peace in my lifetime”? What could you begin building now for a generation you will never see?

**Reformers take the ground, retainers keep it, and fathers
make sure their children’s children inherit it.**

Chapter 14

The Person God Chooses

But God removed Saul and replaced him with David, a man about whom God said, “I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart. He will do everything I want him to do.”

Acts 13:22

Never worry about who will be offended if you speak the truth. Worry about who will be misled, deceived and destroyed if you don't.

I learned that the hard way. In college I started dating a girl who wasn't really a believer. The people around me could see it, but they were afraid of offending me, so nobody said anything. That silence turned into a five-year, on-again, off-again relationship. Eventually we got engaged.

A few months before the wedding, my mentor asked me what I was doing. I cared about her, and I worried about what would happen to her if I walked away. He said something I've never forgotten: “God loves her just as much as He loves you.” She was in God's hands, not mine. I didn't have to worry about whether she would be okay. And then he said, “Just because you care about someone doesn't mean you were called to marry them.”

I called off the engagement.

He was willing to risk offending me because he cared more about my destiny than about my approval. That's what a real friend does.

Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy.

Proverbs 27:6

That mentor understood something the Church needs to recover. God isn't only interested in whether we're saved. He is looking for people after His own heart, people He can trust to rebuild His house. In the last chapter we looked at the reformers He raises up. In this one I want to ask what kind of person He chooses.

Just because you care about something doesn't mean you were called to it.

Run to Win

The apostle Paul loved sports metaphors, and this is one of his best:

Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

One day I sensed the Lord say to me, "Many run the race of life to finish, but few run to win."

That landed hard, because I know what running to win looks like. I bruised and battered my body for years for a wreath that fades. I gave football my mornings, my summers, my joints and my pain. And I made a decision: I cannot look back on my life and see that I gave more for a perishable wreath than I gave for an imperishable one.

King David said it this way when someone offered to give him everything he needed for a sacrifice: “I will not present burnt offerings to the LORD my God that have cost me nothing” (2 Samuel 24:24).

When Paul talks about being disqualified, I don’t believe he’s talking about losing his salvation. He’s talking about forfeiting his seat of destiny on earth and his rewards in heaven. Paul explains elsewhere that everything we build will be tested by fire on judgment day. Work built from gold, silver and jewels will survive. Work built from wood, hay and straw will burn, and the builder “will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames” (1 Corinthians 3:12–15).

So here’s the question I keep asking myself: Is what I’m building and living for worth what Jesus died for?

C. S. Lewis captured the danger in *The Screwtape Letters*, where a senior demon coaches his apprentice on how to keep a man from God:

“Prosperity 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.”

C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

We shouldn’t fear failure nearly as much as we should fear succeeding at something that won’t matter in eternity.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?”

Matthew 16:24–26

Those driven by eternity are purpose driven. Those driven by earthly treasure are pleasure driven.

Two Houses

Scripture gives David one of the greatest epitaphs ever written: “For after David had done the will of God in his own generation, he died and was buried” (Acts 13:36).

Answering the call on your life is one thing. Fulfilling your destiny in your generation is another. Saul was called to be king, and he failed to fulfill his destiny because he valued the approval of people over the favor of God. We looked at his kingdom in Chapter 7. David lived in the fear of the Lord, because he was more concerned with offending God than offending people.

After Saul died, Israel didn’t move smoothly into David’s reign. Scripture says, “That was the beginning of a long war between those who were loyal to Saul and those loyal to David. As time passed David became stronger and stronger, while Saul’s dynasty became weaker and weaker” (2 Samuel 3:1).

I believe the Church is in that kind of war right now: the house of Saul against the house of David, the fear of man against the fear of the Lord, spiritual slavery against freedom. Many will try to avoid the conflict, and that’s understandable. But compromise never keeps a lasting peace. It only makes the conflict harder when it comes. And there will be seasons when it looks like the fight might tear the Church apart. It won’t. The Church will not be destroyed. But the systems and doctrines that have kept people in spiritual slavery will be, and the house of David will grow stronger and stronger.

So what is God looking for? People after His own heart.

William Seymour, who led the Azusa Street revival, described a morning after God filled him with the Spirit, when the Spirit rested on him and spoke:

“If you were only small enough, I could do anything with you!”

William Seymour

Seymour said a great desire came into his heart to be little, and that it was hard to stay low enough for God to work through him. Paul said the same thing to the Corinthians: “God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise” (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Saul was called. David fulfilled his calling. The difference was whose approval mattered most.

What God Is Looking For

When I was fifteen, I kept a football card of a defensive lineman. I kept it as a reminder of the traits, characteristics, agility and athleticism it would take to play at that level.

Sometimes we forget that the Bible is our card. It tells us exactly what God is looking for. And it’s almost never what we would pick.

“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the LORD.

“And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”

Isaiah 55:8–9

When Samuel went to Jesse’s house to anoint the next king, he took one look at the oldest son, Eliab, and was sure he’d found him. God corrected him:

But the LORD said to Samuel, “Don’t judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

1 Samuel 16:7

From that one scene in 1 Samuel 16, I see four qualities of the person God chooses.

1. God Chooses People Who Have Been Overlooked

Jesse didn’t even think enough of David to bring him in from the field. I wrote about that rejection in *The Mystery of the Pain*, so I’ll just say this here: broken dreams can create bitterness or brokenness. The choice is ours.

Those who have been wounded the deepest, if they choose to forgive, will be given the most authority.

Jeremiah Johnson, a prophetic voice, writes about a painful season of rejection and false accusation early in his ministry, and the words a spiritual father spoke to him:

“Son, you need this as part of your destiny. You must understand the sting of rejection and false accusation so that you never operate in this spirit and so that you will learn to father many gifted leaders rather than allowing your insecurities to reject them.”

Jeremiah Johnson, *Cleansing and Igniting the Prophetic*

Do you see rejection as a denial, or as the refiner’s fire preparing you for leadership?

2. God Chooses People Who Aren't Looking to Be Chosen

When Samuel asked if there were any more sons, Jesse answered, in effect, “Well, there’s the youngest. He’s out taking care of the sheep” (1 Samuel 16:11). David wasn’t campaigning. He wasn’t even in the room.

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). Look at the people God called. Moses protested, “Who am I to appear before Pharaoh?” (Exodus 3:11). Gideon said, “My clan is the weakest in the whole tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least in my entire family!” (Judges 6:15). To every excuse Moses gave, God’s answer was the same: “I will be with you” (Exodus 3:12).

Humility births servanthood. The greatest authority ever given to a man led Him to kneel and wash the feet of the men who would betray and abandon Him. When His disciples argued about which of them was the greatest, Jesus said, “Those who are the greatest among you should take the lowest rank, and the leader should be like a servant... For I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:26–27).

3. God Chooses People Who Know He Is Their Defender

Samuel poured the oil on David’s head in front of his brothers. What did David say to his brothers and his father after he was anointed king? Nothing. And that posture followed him the rest of his life.

The anointing is a responsibility to steward, not a reward to strut.

Years later, at Ziklag, when his own men talked about stoning him, “David found strength in the LORD his God” (1 Samuel 30:6). Saul’s heart was moved by the people. David’s heart was moved by God. When your back is against the wall, what is your go-to?

Leaders need thick skin, tender hearts, and eyes locked on Jesus, not on the praises of people or the shine of the spotlight.

In my second season in the NFL, our team was having a bad year, and the local paper ran a story about why. My picture was on the front page. Then I heard the Lord ask me, “Why do their words about you carry more weight than what I say about you?”

People chosen by God learn three things:

- Their enemies become tools in God’s hands to shape their character.
- They have nothing to prove when they know God is their Defender.
- Forgiveness and a love for mercy are required to fulfill their destiny.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego stood in front of a king and a furnace and said it best:

If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn’t, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.

Daniel 3:17–18

God is my Defender. God will deliver me. But even if He doesn’t, I will not bow.

4. God Chooses People Who Love His Presence More Than His Power

Where did David go after he was anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit? Back to the sheep. When Saul later sent for him, the message to Jesse was, “Send me your son David, the shepherd” (1 Samuel 16:19).

Many people would have assumed it was time to take the throne. Many confuse being anointed with being commissioned. Between the anointing and the commissioning lies a bridge called character.

Your anointing will get you known by people, but your obedience will get you known in heaven.

David's heart was never mainly for the throne. It was for the house of God:

The one thing I ask of the LORD— the thing I seek most— is to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, delighting in the LORD's perfections and meditating in his Temple.

Psalm 27:4

He even made a vow: "I will not go home; I will not let myself rest. I will not let my eyes sleep nor close my eyelids in slumber until I find a place to build a house for the LORD, a sanctuary for the Mighty One of Israel" (Psalm 132:3–5).

A friend of mine, I'll call him Evan, encountered the Holy Spirit and felt led to leave a seeker-friendly church to start a house of prayer. At the beginning of that journey he told me, "If I get to play worship songs to God in my closet with nobody listening but stay faithful, I will have accomplished more than most people on earth."

That's a heart God can trust with power.

In *The Final Quest*, Rick Joyner describes a vision in which the Lord warns him about the danger of walking in great power. Many of His messengers have fallen to it. The Lord tells him that power is never His endorsement of the person or even of their message, because the Holy Spirit is given to testify only of Jesus. The wise, like Paul, learn to boast more in their weaknesses than in their strengths. And even someone who abides in His presence and sees His glory can still fall by turning away

from Him to look at themselves. That, the vision says, is how Lucifer fell. He lived in the light of God's glory, began to look at himself more than at the Lord, and took pride in his position and power. The vision ends with a principle I've never forgotten: the more confidence you lose in yourself, the more power God can trust you with, as long as your confidence is in Him.

**The new wine of His Spirit and the power of His anointing
are given not only to bless His people, but to test them.**

Not Punishing, but Preparing

Look at what followed David's anointing:

- Saul tried to kill him again and again.
- He spent years running from Saul, living in caves and in enemy territory.
- He refused to take revenge on Saul twice, when he had him in his hands (1 Samuel 24; 26).
- Roughly fifteen years passed between the oil on his head and the crown.
- After his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, months went by before he repented, when the prophet Nathan confronted him (2 Samuel 12).
- He lived with the consequences of that sin in his own family, including the tragedy of his daughter Tamar (2 Samuel 13).
- He fled Jerusalem when his son Absalom rebelled against him (2 Samuel 15).

And yet this is the man who wrote:

The LORD is my shepherd; I have all that I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.

Psalms 23:1-4

If you've been anointed and then sent back to the sheep, rejected, accused or overlooked, hear this. God is not punishing you. He is preparing you. Trust His plan, not your pain.

For the Road

1. Is what you're building and living for worth what Jesus died for? Are you running to finish or running to win?
2. Of the four qualities of the person God chooses, which one is God working on in you right now?
3. Whose words about you carry more weight than what God says about you? What would it look like to let Him be your Defender?

God isn't looking for the most impressive person in the room. He's looking for a heart after His own.

PART FOUR

The Ancient Paths

What does the Church look like when it comes home?

Chapter 15

Re-Dig the Ancient Wells

And Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of Abraham his father, which the Philistines had stopped after the death of Abraham. And he gave them the names that his father had given them.

Genesis 26:18 (ESV)

The Philistines never had to defeat Abraham's family. They just filled in the wells.

In a dry land, that was enough. You don't have to burn a man's tents if you can cut off his water. A household with no well can't stay, can't grow, and can't feed its flocks. So after Abraham died, his enemies quietly shoveled dirt into everything he had dug, and the water was buried.

Isaac's answer is one of the most important pictures in the Bible for the Church in our day. He didn't hire a consultant. He didn't invent a new water source. He picked up a shovel and went back to his father's wells. He dug again, and when the water came up, he gave each well the same name his father had given it.

The water had never left. It was under the dirt the whole time.

The wells of God were never dry. They were buried.

Isaac's Shovel

I believe the Church has spent a long season digging in the wrong places. When the presence of God grew thin in our gatherings, we didn't go back to the old wells. We built a water park. Better lights, better sound, better programming, better marketing. We learned how to produce an atmosphere when we had stopped hosting a Presence.

In Chapter 1 we looked at the Power Reformation, when the Spirit fell in a humble building on Azusa Street in 1906. That was a generation re-digging an ancient well. But every generation has its Philistines. Comfort, control, offense, the fear of losing the room, the pressure to grow a brand: each one is another shovelful of dirt. What our fathers and mothers in the faith opened can be filled in within one generation.

Notice what happened when Isaac started digging. His servants found fresh water in the valley, and the local herdsmen showed up to fight over it. Isaac named that well Esek, which means "argument." They dug another, and the fighting started again, so he named it Sitnah, which means "hostility." Then he moved on and dug a third, and no one fought over it. He named it Rehoboth, "open space," and said, "At last the LORD has created enough space for us to prosper in this land" (Genesis 26:19–22).

Re-digging is rarely quiet. If you go back to the ancient wells, expect an Esek and a Sitnah before you reach your Rehoboth. Keep digging.

Then Isaac went up to Beersheba. That night the Lord appeared to him and said, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you" (Genesis 26:24). Isaac built an altar there and worshiped, and his servants dug one more well. They came running with the news: "We've found water!"

**The way forward for the Church is the way back to her
Father's wells.**

The Seven Ancient Wells

So which wells are we talking about? Isaiah saw the Messiah coming from the stump of Jesse, and he described the Spirit who would rest on Him.

And 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

John later saw seven torches burning before the throne and was told, “This is the sevenfold Spirit of God” (Revelation 4:5). One Spirit, seven streams. I see in them seven ancient wells the Church has drunk from since the beginning, and each has a face in Scripture.

- 1. The Spirit of the LORD.** His presence and power, so that we depend on Him instead of our own might. Gideon was a frightened farmer who called himself the least in his family, until “the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon with power” and he blew the trumpet that rallied Israel (Judges 6:34). Picture a small group with little money and few leaders that decides to pray before it plans. That’s this well: “It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies” (Zechariah 4:6).
- 2. The Spirit of Wisdom.** Knowing what is true and lasting, and when and how to act on what God shows you. Solomon called for a sword, and the real mother was revealed (1 Kings 3:16–28). Wisdom is also the well that says, “Not yet. Wait until they can hear it.” When matters as much as how.
- 3. The Spirit of Understanding.** Revelation: the veil lifts, and you see God’s blueprint. When no wise man in Babylon could interpret the king’s dream, Daniel could, because “there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets” (Daniel 2:28). This is the well you drink from when a

passage you've read a hundred times suddenly opens, and you see what God is building.

4. **The Spirit of Counsel.** The divine how-to: God's plan of action, received and waited on. Jethro watched Moses judge the people from morning until evening and said, "This is not good!" Then he gave him a plan to share the load (Exodus 18:17–24).
5. **The Spirit of Might.** The divine machinery that brings God's plan to pass while we simply show up and obey. Israel marched around Jericho, and on the seventh day the walls fell (Joshua 6). Might is also the strength you know isn't your own, when you're exhausted and grieving and you keep showing up anyway.
6. **The Spirit of Knowledge.** Intimate knowing, the kind the New Testament calls *ginosko*, that decodes what God is saying and cuts to the heart. When Peter preached at Pentecost, "Peter's words pierced their hearts," and they asked, "Brothers, what should we do?" (Acts 2:37). It's the same well you touch when you pray for a stranger, sense a detail about their pain you had no way of knowing, and watch their heart open.
7. **The Spirit of the Fear of the LORD.** Reverence for His beauty and holiness that keeps us from presumption and evil. Job lost his children, his wealth and his health, yet he worshiped, and "in all of this, Job did not sin by blaming God" (Job 1:22). It's also the quiet choice to keep your integrity when no one would ever find out, because God sees.

Most of us have a favorite well. Some churches love wisdom and understanding and are nervous about might. Others love might and have filled in the fear of the Lord. The Messiah carried all seven. His Body is meant to carry them too.

A Church that drinks from one well will eventually call its own thirst normal.

Beersheba, the Well of the Seven

Isaac's digging ended at Beersheba. Generations earlier, Abraham had dug a well there and given seven lambs as a witness that the well was his. The name has been understood as both "well of the oath" and "well of seven" (Genesis 21:28–31). It was the place of covenant, where God appeared to Isaac in the night and Isaac built an altar. That's where re-digging all seven wells leads: to the covenant, the altar, and the Presence.

But there's a warning on the way there. You can re-dig the wells and still pollute the water. Jesus said, "For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). In *Cultivating a Prophetic Community* I wrote about the long divorce between the Word and the Spirit. When they separate, each side ends up with something almost right.

- **A form of godliness** is form without power. It says, "Grit it out with a reading plan. Feelings don't matter." But the Word without the Spirit becomes information instead of revelation. Paul asked the Galatians, "After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort?" (Galatians 3:3).
- **Power without truth** is experience without anchor. It says, "Stop reading until you have a fresh encounter," or, "The wilder it gets, the more God must be there." But God was not in the wind or the fire. He was in the gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:11–12). Waiting for a feeling before you obey makes experience your master.
- **Spirit and truth** keeps feeding on the Word and asks the Holy Spirit to breathe on it again.

Picture a church that wants to cut spontaneous worship so the service always ends on time. A form of godliness says, "Keep it fully scripted." Power without truth says, "Drop all planning and just flow." Spirit and truth plans well and leaves room for the Holy Spirit to lead. A service God

can't interrupt has no room for Him. Reinhard Bonnke is often quoted as saying, "The less Holy Spirit we have, the more cake and coffee we need."

It takes the Word of God plus the Spirit of God to equal the will of God.

And never forget who the water is. The Holy Spirit is a Person, and He wants more of you.

Upon or Within?

When the wells open again, power comes back. And here we need to be careful, because the Church has often confused two kinds of anointing.

- **Upon: the power anointing.** A gift stirred by the hunger in the room. It produces results.
- **Within: the abiding anointing.** Intimacy stirred by your own hunger. It produces fruit.

Jesus did only a few miracles in Nazareth "because of their unbelief" (Matthew 13:58). The power that rests upon a person is stirred by the faith and hunger of the people around them. That's why a room can be electric and dozens can be healed, while the preacher's home is quietly falling apart. "For God's gifts and his call can never be withdrawn" (Romans 11:29). Power can keep flowing while intimacy erodes. Jesus warned that on judgment day many will say, "Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name," and He will answer, "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:22-23).

Results aren't the same as fruit.

The abiding anointing works differently. When Jesus taught, the crowds noticed that He taught "with real authority," unlike their teachers of religious law (Matthew 7:29). He wasn't repeating other rabbis. His

teaching flowed from His relationship with the Father. Authority is the overflow of private intimacy.

Picture a quiet grandmother who prays with the young women she disciples. No stage, no lights, and they're changed for years. Picture a worship leader whose platform is taken away, and her private devotion keeps her steady and sweet. No one gave her that anointing, so no one can take it away. She cultivated it with her own hunger.

Here's the equation I've learned to live by:

- A spiritual gift plus stewarding the gift equals anointing, and it brings favor with people.
- Intimacy plus obedience equals authority, and it brings favor with God.

Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:5

You can be entertained by someone's anointing, but you're transformed when someone walks in authority.

The New Wine Test

Here's something about revival we don't like to say out loud. When God pours out the new wine of His Spirit, He gives it first to test His people more than to bless them.

Every time the wine is poured, four responses rise up.

1. **The skeptic** resists it because it's unfamiliar or outside tradition. "If it isn't in our order of service, it isn't from God." Concern for sound doctrine is good, but tradition can't be the test. Paul said that when prophecy flows in order, an unbeliever may fall to his knees and

declare, “God is truly here among you” (1 Corinthians 14:25). The skeptic is tested in the fear of the Lord.

2. **The arrogant** resists it because it didn’t come from their ministry. Picture a pastor who tells his people to stay away from the revival across town, while privately he’s bothered that it didn’t start at his church. “For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind” (James 3:16). The arrogant are tested in envy and pride.
3. **The righteous remnant** carries it and is refined through criticism and attack. Think of the intercessor who prays for revival for years, unseen and often misunderstood, like Daniel Nash, who went ahead of Charles Finney’s meetings to pray. The prophet Daniel saw that some of the wise would fall victim to persecution, and in this way they would be “refined and cleansed and made pure” (Daniel 11:35). The remnant is tested in motive and dependence.
4. **The prophet for profit** exploits it for show, attention and money. Picture the speaker selling “anointing packages,” or the leader who coaches his team to exaggerate testimonies so the clips go viral. They follow the footsteps of Balaam, “who loved to earn money by doing wrong” (2 Peter 2:15). The prophet for profit is exposed by fruit.

When we pray for revival, we’re asking for this test. That should sober us, and it should also encourage us.

The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.

2 Chronicles 16:9

God’s eyes pass over the impressive and rest on the committed. To the Church without mixture, I believe the Father will give the Spirit without measure.

The new wine reveals what was already in the wineskin.

Cupbearer or Baker?

In *Cultivating a Prophetic Community* I wrote about the cupbearer and the baker Joseph met in Pharaoh's dungeon (Genesis 40). I'll bring just one question from that prison into this chapter, because it decides what happens when the wells are open again.

Both men were accused. Both felt misunderstood. Only one was restored to serve wine in the presence of the king. Seasons of delay expose true motives, and the baker's bread carried the poison of pride: a ministry that didn't produce humility in God's people.

Here's how the two hearts look in the life of a church.

- The baker measures every sermon by how many people shared the clip. The cupbearer is passed over for the stage and quietly keeps leading the prayer room no one sees.
- The baker's teaching is brilliant, and everyone leaves impressed, but no one leaves more humble or more like Jesus. The cupbearer pastors a church that stays small, while the people he disciples grow in love, joy, patience and self-control.
- The baker says, "We need to make sure everyone knows this revival started at our church." The cupbearer, when his ministry finally grows, adds more accountability, not less.

Jesus warned, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:6). Yeast puffs up the loaf without adding substance. That's what showmanship does to a ministry. It makes it look bigger than it is.

Fire tests the purity of silver and gold, but a person is tested by being praised.

Proverbs 27:21

In the world, power is the goal. In the Kingdom, power is the test. John the Baptist had the cupbearer's heart: "He must become greater and

greater, and I must become less and less” (John 3:30).

Do you want to be recognized, or do you want to reflect His nature?

Dig Again

The water is still there. Every well our fathers and mothers in the faith opened is still under the dirt, waiting for a generation with a shovel and a hungry heart.

Here is my prayer for the Church. Lord, restore the mantle of apostolic preaching that cuts the hearts of men and women and returns them to true repentance. Turn the heart of Your Bride, and let her remember the love of her youth. Let her return to her first love. Open the ancient wells again, all seven of them, and let us find water where our fathers found it.

You don't have to invent a new move of God. You only have to dig where He has already moved.

For the Road

1. Which of the seven ancient wells have you drunk from most deeply? Which one has been filled in, in your life or in your church?
2. Where do you see the anointing upon you running ahead of the anointing within you? What would it look like to cultivate your own oil this week?
3. If God poured out new wine in your church tomorrow, would you respond as the skeptic, the arrogant, the remnant, or the prophet for profit? Be honest.

The wells were never dry. Pick up the shovel and dig again.

Chapter 16

The Gospel of the Kingdom

*May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth,
as it is in heaven.*

Matthew 6:10

Hold your hand out in front of you. Where is it?

Right in front of you.

That's where Jesus said the Kingdom was. The first words of His public ministry were these:

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent
and believe in the gospel.*

Mark 1:15 (ESV)

At hand. Not far away. Not someday. Close enough to touch.

Somewhere along the way, many of us were handed a gospel that lives a long way off. It's true, and it's precious, but it's mostly about where we go when we die. Jesus preached a gospel about what happens when God reigns, and He said it had already arrived.

To understand how to make the Church great again, you have to understand what the Kingdom of God is. Jesus told us to "seek the Kingdom of God above all else" (Matthew 6:33). It's hard to seek something you've never been taught to recognize.

Two Gospels

There is a difference between the gospel of heaven and the gospel of the Kingdom.

The gospel of heaven emphasizes the individual's personal relationship with God and the assurance of eternal life. It focuses on the forgiveness of sins and the hope of heaven. None of that is wrong. "Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith" (Genesis 15:6). Jesus said Abraham "rejoiced as he looked forward to my coming" (John 8:56). Faith in Jesus is the doorway, and nothing will ever replace it.

But a doorway isn't a house.

The gospel of the Kingdom calls for repentance, a transformed life, justice, and the rule of God established on earth. It changes individual lives and then the structures those lives touch. It was the central theme of Jesus' preaching. It's what He promised through Ezekiel long before He came:

And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.

Ezekiel 36:26-27

Here's the simplest way I know to say it.

The gospel of heaven gets sinners to heaven. The gospel of the Kingdom gets heaven to earth by transforming sinners into saints.

When the only gospel we preach is a ticket out, we produce people who are grateful to be forgiven but have no idea they've been drafted. They

wait for heaven while hell runs the neighborhood. The Acts 2 Church didn't wait. They prayed for the Kingdom to come, and then they lived as if it had.

The Church will be great again when the miracle of salvation shifts from God rescuing sinners from hell to God liberating sinners from their sinful nature, transforming children of wrath into the adopted children of God.

A Place and a Government

Is the Kingdom of God a place or a government?

It's both. Every kingdom is a territory and a rule. The Kingdom of God is wherever the King's will is done, and the King's will is meant to be done "on earth, as it is in heaven."

Think about an embassy. An embassy is a small piece of one nation's government operating inside another nation's territory. Walk through its doors and you're under a different authority, even though you never left the city.

Jesus was a walking and talking embassy. John said, "I saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove from heaven and staying on him" (John 1:32). Wherever Jesus went, heaven's government went with Him. The sick were healed, demons left, sinners were forgiven, and the religious systems of His day were confronted. Through His death and resurrection, that same Spirit now lives in us. "So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

That's why the Kingdom has been under attack since the Garden. The enemy's strategy has never changed. He tries to usurp the authority of God with a lie: "Did God really say...?" (Genesis 3:1). He twists and distorts the Word, and he goes after the mind, because whoever governs your thinking governs your life.

We fight back on the same ground. “We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think” (Romans 12:2).

Some things we pray away. Other things we meditate away, by fixing our minds on the truth of God’s Word until it renovates the way we think. We are commanded to pray without ceasing and to meditate on the Word day and night, not to read it for five minutes and close the book.

A 24/7 devil will not be overcome by daily-devotional Christianity.

Psalm 2, Joel 2, Acts 2

I believe there is a pattern in Scripture for the days we are living in. It runs through three chapters that all share the same number.

A Psalm 2 crisis.

The nations rage against the Lord and His anointed.

Why are the nations so angry? Why do they waste their time with futile plans? The kings of the earth prepare for battle; the rulers plot together against the LORD and against his anointed one. “Let us break their chains,” they cry, “and free ourselves from slavery to God.” But the one who rules in heaven laughs.

Psalm 2:1–4

This is the season of refinement. The world grows openly hostile to God’s rule, and the heat exposes what the Church is really made of. Notice that heaven isn’t panicking. Heaven laughs.

In need of a Joel 2 response.

Joel didn't answer the crisis with a strategy. He blew a trumpet. "Sound the trumpet in Jerusalem! Raise the alarm on my holy mountain!" (Joel 2:1). The shofar was used both to warn of danger and to call the assembly together. Alarms are meant to wake people up, and the Church has been sleeping in a passive, distracted and self-serving posture.

That is why the LORD says, "Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Don't tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead." Return to the LORD your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.

Joel 2:12-13

This is the season of repentance. God is after torn hearts, not torn robes.

That will birth an Acts 2 outpouring.

Joel's promise didn't stop at repentance. "Then, after doing all those things, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy" (Joel 2:28). Hundreds of years later, Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost and said, "What you see was predicted long ago by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). The crisis led to repentance, and the repentance opened the heavens. Revival, reformation and a Kingdom revolution followed.

Crisis, response, outpouring. Refinement, repentance, revival. The pattern still holds.

So do not panic.

There are hard days ahead in the flesh, but great days ahead in the Spirit.

Escapism or Engagement

I believe church culture has been sold a false bill of goods about the end-days ministry of the Church.

We've been told the last days are mainly about the revelation of the Antichrist and his demonic system of government, currency and religion. We've been told the goal is to be rescued from the coming chaos. That story has shaped a whole generation of believers who are more afraid of the future than excited about the King.

I believe the Scriptures tell a greater story. The last days are about the revelation of the Warrior King, Jesus Christ, His judgment of every false system, and His refining fire coming to purify those who carry His name.

Sincere believers disagree about the order of events at the end of the age, and I'm not going to settle that here. Jesus Himself said, "No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows" (Matthew 24:36). But whatever you believe about the timing, the question underneath is the same. Is your hope built on escape, or on engagement?

I call the escape version "Veggie Tales Christianity." The Bible is reduced to gentle moral lessons and self-help tales with no transforming power. The goal is to stay nice, stay safe, and wait to be taken out. It's a passive discipleship that withdraws from every cultural challenge and calls its fear "faith."

Jesus prayed the opposite: "I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one" (John 17:15). I believe that's one of many scriptures that dismantles the narrative of a great escape. The safety Jesus prayed for is not a promise that we'll never suffer. It's protection from the self-deception of the last days, and from running out of the oil of intimacy with Him. No one can snatch us out of the Father's hand.

When the disciples asked Jesus about the timing of the Kingdom, He redirected them. “The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:7–8). He didn’t give them a calendar. He gave them a mission.

Jesus called us “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13–14). Salt has to touch what it preserves. Light has to shine where it’s dark.

*And the Good News about the Kingdom will be preached
throughout the whole world, so that all nations will hear it; and
then the end will come.*

Matthew 24:14

**One narrative is fear-based and rooted in escapism. The
greater narrative is rooted in faith and engagement.**

Exodus 2.0 and Acts 2.0

I see the book of Revelation as “Exodus 2.0” and “Acts 2.0,” written in advance.

It doesn’t reveal a weak, struggling, barely surviving Church. It reveals a people walking in boldness, protection, authority and power. And it isn’t centered on an end-times Pharaoh. Its first line tells you whose story it is: “This is a revelation from Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:1). It’s the revelation of the greater Moses, the greater David, and the Warrior King Bridegroom coming for a pure Bride.

Look at the parallels:

- **Deliverance from an oppressor.** God broke Pharaoh’s grip on Israel. In Acts, an angel walked Peter out of a locked prison (Acts 12:6–11). In Revelation, God judges the beast’s kingdom and delivers His people.

- **Power displayed through God's people.** Moses confronted Pharaoh with signs. The apostles healed the sick in the streets (Acts 5:12–16). The two witnesses shut the sky and strike the earth with plagues (Revelation 11:6).
- **A kingdom of priests.** Israel was called “my kingdom of priests, my holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). The Church is a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). Revelation declares, “He has made us a Kingdom of priests for God his Father” (Revelation 1:6).
- **Protection in the middle of judgment.** The Passover blood marked Israel's doors. In Revelation, the angels are told to harm nothing “until we have placed the seal of God on the foreheads of his servants” (Revelation 7:3).
- **A great harvest.** Israel left Egypt carrying the plunder of the nation. Persecution scattered the early believers, and they preached the Word wherever they went (Acts 8:4). Revelation shows “a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language” (Revelation 7:9).
- **False worship overthrown.** The golden calf was ground to powder. Babylon falls.
- **The Lamb wins.** The Passover lamb secured Israel's redemption. The apostles proclaimed Jesus as the Lamb. In Revelation, “they have defeated him by the blood of the Lamb and by their testimony” (Revelation 12:11).

The same God who split the sea and filled the upper room wrote the last chapter. He doesn't change His character at the end of the story.

The last chapter belongs to the Lamb.

The Two Witnesses

And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will be clothed in burlap and will prophesy during those 1,260 days. These two prophets are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of all the earth.

Revelation 11:3–4

People have argued for centuries about who the two witnesses are. Some say Enoch and Elijah, because neither of them died. Some say Moses and Elijah, because they appeared with Jesus on the mountain and because the witnesses' signs echo theirs. I hold my own view with an open hand. But I see in the two witnesses a picture of a remnant church, and I'm not the first. Many Protestant interpreters since the Reformation have read them as a picture of the faithful, witnessing Church.

Look at how Scripture interprets its own symbols. Revelation tells us plainly that “the seven lampstands are the seven churches” (Revelation 1:20). And the olive trees come from Zechariah's vision, where the oil flows into the lampstand and the angel explains it: “It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies” (Zechariah 4:6). Lampstands carry the light. Olive trees supply the oil. A Church that shines, fueled by the Spirit and nothing else.

Here's what that remnant looks like.

It's clothed in sackcloth.

The witnesses are dressed in burlap, the clothing of mourning and repentance. Their power doesn't make them proud. It's the Joel 2 heart, torn and humble, carrying the authority of heaven. Of the seven churches Jesus addressed in Revelation, only two received no rebuke: Smyrna, faithful under persecution, and Philadelphia, which obeyed His word with little strength (Revelation 3:8). The remnant looks like them. “Seek

the LORD, all who are humble... Perhaps even yet the LORD will protect you" (Zephaniah 2:3).

Fire comes out of its mouth.

"If anyone tries to harm them, fire flashes from their mouths" (Revelation 11:5). God told Jeremiah, "I will make my words in your mouth a fire" (Jeremiah 5:14, NIV), and asked, "Does not my word burn like fire?" (Jeremiah 23:29). The fire of the remnant is the Word of God spoken with the authority of the Spirit. We saw it when Peter confronted Ananias and Sapphira, "and great fear gripped the entire church" (Acts 5:11). When the Word is restored above every personal opinion and every man's word, the fire returns.

It can shut the sky.

Like Elijah, the witnesses have power over the rain. Through Amos, God said, "I sent rain on one town but withheld it from another" (Amos 4:7). I believe there will be pockets of mercy in the days ahead, like Goshen in Egypt, where "there was light as usual where the people of Israel lived" while darkness covered the land (Exodus 10:23). The prophet put it this way: "Darkness as black as night covers all the nations of the earth, but the glory of the LORD rises and appears over you" (Isaiah 60:2).

It knows what it already has.

"Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:7). The gifts of the Spirit aren't a luxury for the last days. They're a need. The Church isn't called to flee the culture but to carry the Kingdom into it.

This is the same picture we've been tracing through this whole book. A humble Church, fueled by the ancient wells, carrying the Word like fire, witnessing to the King. Jesus saved the best wine for last (John 2:10). I believe He's saving His best for the end of the story, too.

**God isn't raising a remnant to hide. He's raising a
lampstand.**

For the Road

1. Which gospel have you mostly lived by: the gospel of heaven or the gospel of the Kingdom? What would change this week if you saw yourself as an embassy of heaven where you work and live?
2. Look at the pattern of Psalm 2, Joel 2 and Acts 2. Where do you see crisis around you, and what would a torn-heart response look like in your own life?
3. When you think about the end of the age, is your first feeling fear or faith? What would it take to trade escapism for engagement?

**The Kingdom is still at hand. Repent, believe, and let
heaven reach earth through you.**

Chapter 17

The Family Table

They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity.

Acts 2:46

Nobody buys a ticket to a family table.

You don't earn your seat by performing. You don't get it by being the most talented person in the house. You sit there because you belong. Someone pulls out a chair, someone passes you the bread, and someone notices when you're not there.

That's what the first Church was. Before there were buildings, budgets or brands, there were tables. The believers met in homes, broke bread together, and "each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

Back in chapter 2, I told you about the day I said the living room sounded more like Jesus. Of all the church models we looked at, only one is biblical: the family. Church is a household. Love, shepherding, shared life, discipline, accountability and spiritual formation.

The Church doesn't need to invent a new model. She needs to come back to the table.

"God places the lonely in families" (Psalm 68:6). When Jesus was told His mother and brothers were waiting outside, He looked at the people

around Him and said, “Look, these are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:34–35).

A franchise has customers. A family has sons and daughters.

So what does it take to keep a family table healthy? In this last chapter I want to give you four things: fathers and mothers who equip, a table set with grace and truth, love that refuses the counterfeit, and a circle guarded with wisdom.

Equipping, Not Titles

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.

Ephesians 4:11–12

In *Cultivating a Prophetic Community*, I wrote about what each of these gifts gives birth to. Here I want to look at them as a family looks at its parents: each one facing a different direction, each one carrying a different burden, and each one with a shadow it can’t see without the others.

- **The apostle** faces forward. The burden is building God’s Kingdom. The temptation is pride. Without accountability, apostles birth empires and franchises instead of movements.
- **The prophet** faces up. The burden is God’s heart and voice. The temptation is isolation, offense and victimhood. Without accountability, prophets birth a breakdown instead of a breakthrough.

- **The evangelist** faces out. The burden is the lost. The temptation is celebrity and skipping discipleship. Without accountability, evangelists birth converts instead of sons and daughters.
- **The pastor** faces inward. The burden is people's hearts. The temptation is enablement and burnout. Without accountability, pastors birth entitled children instead of selfless servants.
- **The teacher** faces downward, into the Word. The burden is the revelation of truth. The temptation is head knowledge and legalism. Without accountability, teachers birth scholars instead of disciples.

Picture a few of these shadows.

A leader carries everyone's burdens alone and is sinking into exhaustion and depression. That's the pastor without a team. Moses cried, "I can't carry all these people by myself!" (Numbers 11:14). We're told to carry each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2), not everyone's burdens alone.

Thousands raise their hands at an outreach, and no one follows up to disciple them. That's the evangelist without the pastor and the teacher beside him.

A leader's prophetic words can never be questioned or weighed by anyone. That's the prophet without accountability. "Let two or three people prophesy, and let the others evaluate what is said" (1 Corinthians 14:29).

A brilliant Bible teacher's class produces people who can argue doctrine but rarely change. That's the teacher without the others.

A gifted leader's churches become a franchise built around his name and brand. That's the apostle without a family.

Every one of those shadows grows in isolation. That's why God never gave the Church one gift. He gave her five, and He said their job was to equip, not to be admired.

Contrary to popular belief,
truth can divide.

If your version of love
always unites,
it is love redefined without truth.



Not everyone holds an office, but everyone carries a five-fold gift. When they work together under Christ, no single role dominates. The table needs all five voices, and it needs every son and daughter doing the work of ministry.

The gifts were given to equip the family, not to crown the leader.

Grace and Truth at the Table

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14 (ESV)

Jesus wasn't half grace and half truth. He was full of both.

Every family table eventually faces a hard conversation. When it does, there are three ways to respond. There's love without truth: silence, flattery, "your truth." There's truth without love: accusation. And there's truth in love, which is what Jesus looks like.

Truth isn't a feeling or a preference. It's a Person. God's love is open to everyone, but His truth doesn't bend to fit us.

Truth without love is offensive, and love without truth betrays God's love.

Picture a small group that values keeping the peace so much that nobody ever addresses sin. Love without truth says, "Leave it alone. Unity matters most." But that's the false peace Jeremiah wept over in the same chapter as the ancient paths: "They give assurances of peace when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14). Truth without love starts calling people out by name in front of the group. Accountability without relationship becomes accusation. Truth in love pursues real unity: agreement around God's

Word, with loving accountability. “Can two people walk together without agreeing on the direction?” (Amos 3:3).

Picture a leader who says, “If you honor me, you won’t question my decisions.” Love without truth stays silent. Truth without love accuses him publicly. Truth in love honors him and still brings the concern respectfully, measured by Scripture. Honor isn’t blind loyalty, and using “honor” to silence accountability is control.

Picture a teenager at your kitchen table who says, “Truth is different for everyone.” Love without truth says nothing, so they won’t feel judged. Truth without love lectures them until they agree. Truth in love asks questions, listens, and walks them toward Jesus as the Truth. After Joshua’s generation died, “another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the LORD” (Judges 2:10). Silence passes on a vacuum, not faith. And lectures win arguments, not hearts.

We will “speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ” (Ephesians 4:15). That’s how a family grows up.

Correction is protection.

Salt or Sugar?

Love and lust can look alike. The counterfeit always tastes sweet.

Lust is our attempt to get from the created what only the Creator can give.

A family table can’t survive on counterfeit love, and the Church has paid dearly for pretending otherwise. Here’s how to taste the difference.

Love says, “I made a covenant with my eyes” (Job 31:1). Lust says, “It’s just a thought. I’ll deal with it if it ever becomes a problem.”

Love says, “I’d rather wait for God’s promise than settle for a counterfeit.” Lust asks, “What good is my purity to me right now?” That’s Esau’s lie. He “traded his birthright as the firstborn son for a single meal” (Hebrews 12:16). Ishmaels come from impatience. Isaacs come from waiting on God.

Love says, “I’ll protect Jesus’ name, even if it costs my platform.” Lust says, “For the ministry’s sake, let’s keep this quiet.” Protecting your brand is the counterfeit of protecting Jesus’ glory, and cover-ups turn a house of prayer into a house of predators.

Love says, “I choose you, even on the ordinary days.” That’s what children need to see modeled at the table: faithfulness and endurance, not just romance. Love is a covenant choice.

Love knows the heart before it touches the body. Lust knows the body before it knows the heart. “Love is patient” (1 Corinthians 13:4), and it chooses covenant over feelings.

“Taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8). Once you’ve tasted Him, the counterfeit loses its flavor.

The original version guards His glory. The perversion guards your brand.

The Circle of Trust

A family table has an open door, but it isn’t a public square.

Love everyone, but don’t give everyone access.

Jesus loved the crowds. He fed them, healed them and wept over their city. But when many believed in Him because of His miracles, John tells us, “Jesus didn’t trust them, because he knew human nature” (John 2:24). He loved the multitude, chose twelve, and took three up the mountain. That’s not rejection. That’s wisdom.

Someone is always knocking at the gate of your heart. The flatterer, who only tells you what you want to hear: “Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy” (Proverbs 27:6). The crab, who pulls you back into the bucket every time you try to climb out. The handler, who wants you to carry his complaint into the meeting and leave his name out of it. The Nicodemus friend, who agrees with you in private and disappears in public. The plant imposter, who quotes Scripture constantly and quietly sows division against the leaders.

With every one of them, there are two easy mistakes. You can open the gate and give them full access because you want to be kind. Or you can slam the gate and cut them off because you want to be safe. Both are almost right. The answer is to guard your circle with love: keep loving them from outside the gate.

So who gets an all-access pass? Only someone who knows you, respects you, supports you, protects you, corrects you, and above all demonstrates Christlike character. Paul could say, “And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). That’s the standard for the people closest to your heart.

And remember: “I love you” and “I trust you” are not the same sentence. Forgiveness is given. Trust is earned, and rebuilt over time.

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

The Love Reformation

In the first chapter I told you I believe there have been two great reformations since the birth of the Acts 2 Church, and that we’re standing on the edge of a third. The Word Reformation restored the Book. The Power Reformation restored the Spirit. The Love Reformation will restore the family.

Its leaders will be faceless men and women. Its focus is the Father. Its verse is the one that started it all: we love because He loved us first (1 John 4:19).

I don't expect it to have a famous face. I expect it to look like a father who opens his home on a weeknight. Like a mother in the faith who notices the young woman sitting alone and pulls out a chair. Like apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers who have laid down their pride to raise sons and daughters together. Like a small group that tells each other the truth in love. Like twenty people in a living room.

That's the Church Malachi saw, with the hearts of the fathers turned to the children and the hearts of the children turned to their fathers (Malachi 4:6). That's the Church Jesus described when He said, "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples" (John 13:35).

When I say "make the Church great again," this is what I mean. Nothing more and nothing less. A family filled with the Spirit, built on the true God, carrying the gospel of the Kingdom, gathered around His table.

The world won't be won by our platforms. It will be won by our tables.

We've traced the cracks down to the foundation. We've named the idols in the house. We've watched the prodigal Bride turn toward home, and we've walked the ancient paths again. There's one more thing waiting at the end of the road, and God promised it through Jeremiah the day He first pointed to the ancient paths. Rest for your souls.

The table is set. There's a chair with your name on it.

For the Road

1. Which direction does your gift face: forward, up, out, inward or down?
Which of that gift's shadows do you most need others to help you see?
2. When a hard conversation comes, do you lean toward love without truth or truth without love? Who in your life needs you to speak the truth in love this week?
3. Who currently has an all-access pass to your heart? Is there someone you need to love from outside the gate, or someone faithful you need to invite closer?

The Father is setting a table, and He's bringing His family home.

EPILOGUE

Rest for Your Souls

Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Matthew 11:28–29

Six hundred years before Jesus walked the roads of Galilee, God made a promise through Jeremiah: “Ask for the old, godly way, and walk in it. Travel its path, and you will find rest for your souls” (Jeremiah 6:16).

Then Jesus stood up and said the same words about Himself. Rest for your souls.

That’s the secret of the ancient path. It was never only a set of practices or a church model. The ancient path is a Person. Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Every road back to the Acts 2 Church is really a road back to Him.

The ancient path isn’t a method. It’s a Man, and His name is Jesus.

A Lamp on the Old Road

Ancient roads didn’t have streetlights. If you traveled at night, you carried a lamp. “Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path” (Psalm 119:105).

Jesus told a story about ten bridesmaids who carried lamps out to meet a bridegroom. All ten had lamps. Only five had oil. When the cry came at midnight, the foolish ones begged to borrow, and they were told, “We don’t have enough for all of us” (Matthew 25:9).

That’s why I made the game *Keep Your Lamp Burning*. Oil can’t be borrowed. You can sit in a great church, under a gifted pastor, in a room full of worship, and still be walking the road on someone else’s light. A family can walk the ancient path together, but every son and daughter has to carry their own lamp, filled with their own oil, from their own time at His feet.

The good news is that the oil is still free. The wells are still there. The Father still sets a table every day for anyone who will sit down with Him.

**A family can walk the path together, but every child
carries their own lamp.**

A Blessing for the Road

So here is my prayer for you as you close this book.

May you stop repainting the walls and let God heal the foundation. May you be a watchman with your eyes open and your heart soft. May every idol in your house fall before the true God, seen as He really is. May you trade the kingdom of Saul for the heart of Jonathan. May you find your place in the Father’s family and set a place for someone else. May you re-dig the ancient wells and drink deeply again. May your church look more like a table than a stage. And may you walk the old road all the way home, with your lamp burning and oil to spare.

The path is ancient. The Bridegroom is coming. And there is rest for your souls.

Keep your lamp burning.

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