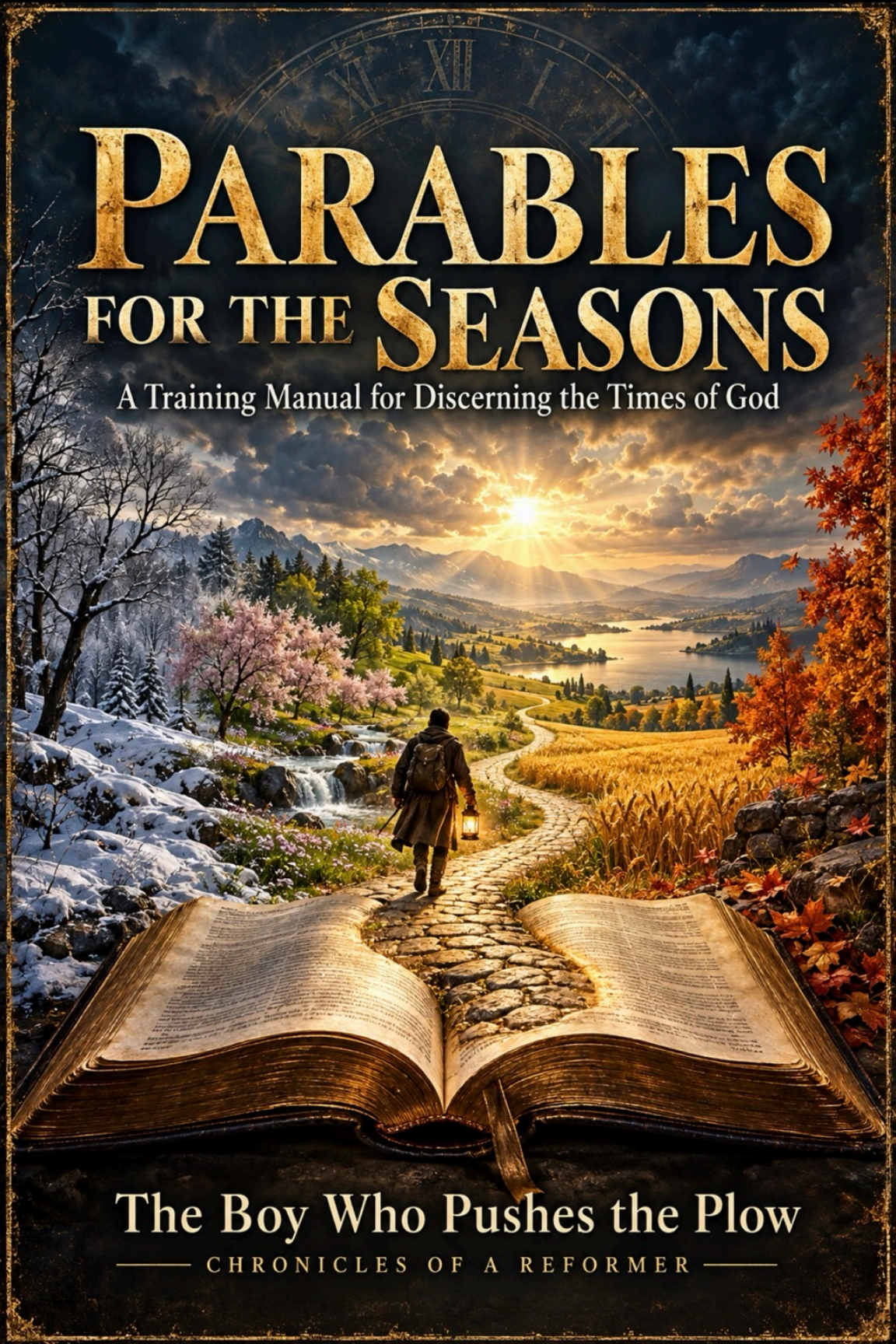




PARABLES FOR THE SEASONS

A Training Manual for Discerning the Times of God

The Boy Who Pushes the Plow

— CHRONICLES OF A REFORMER —

CHRONICLES OF A REFORMER

Parables for the Seasons

A Training Manual for Discerning the Times of God

THE BOY WHO PUSHES THE PLOW

*"If God spares my life, ere many years pass,
I will cause a boy that driveth the plough
to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost."*

William Tyndale

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible,
New Living Translation.

The films, songs and shows discussed in this book are used as pictures.
Where a story gets God wrong, the parable says so.

Chronicles of a Reformer
The 9 Seasons of the Kingdom of God

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INTRODUCTION

Trained, Not Just Taught

From the tribe of Issachar, there were 200 leaders of the tribe with their relatives. All these men understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take.

1 Chronicles 12:32

There are two kinds of learning. One fills the mind with information: facts, verses, outlines and right answers. The other trains us to use what we know when life doesn't come with a label. We need both.

Most books are written for the first kind, and that is what a book is designed to do. A good book explains, teaches and gives us words for what is true, and we are better for the ones we read. But a page can only carry so much. We can finish a good book, agree with every chapter, and still miss its truth when it walks into our week dressed as something else. Knowing a verse about pride is one thing. Recognizing pride when it shows up as “just being honest” is another.

Information tells you what is true. Discernment helps you recognize it when it shows up.

Scripture describes the second kind of learning again and again. The men of Issachar didn't only know Israel's history. They “understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take.” They knew what time it was, and they knew what to

do about it. Hebrews says the mature are those “who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong” (Hebrews 5:14). Notice the word *training*. Discernment grows the way strength grows: by practice, over time, under the eye of someone who has been there before.

Anyone who has sat in a film room knows the difference. You study the tape all week so that when that formation shows up on game day, you don’t have to figure it out in the moment. You recognize it before the ball is snapped. This book is film study for the soul.

Why parables

Jesus taught this way. He didn’t hand the crowds a lecture. He talked about seed and soil, lost sheep and lost coins, two sons and a wedding feast. Then He said, “Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand” (Matthew 13:9). A parable doesn’t do your thinking for you. It invites you to think. You have to lean in, turn the story over, and ask, “Where am I in this?”

The parables in this manual come from movies, songs, history and the street, read through the lens of Scripture. They are pictures, never theology. Some films get God wrong, and where they do, the parable says so in a line and moves on. The Word judges the movie. The movie never judges the Word. Eat the chicken, throw away the bone. But a good picture can carry truth into places a lecture can’t reach, because what the eye receives, the heart often keeps.

Why seasons

Every believer walks through seasons. *A Reason for Your Season* lays out nine of them in the Kingdom of God: Refinement, Repentance, Revival, Reformation, Recalculate, Revolution, Release, Reward and Repeat. In each one God is doing a particular work, and each one has its own signs and its own counterfeit. Seasons are not errors. They are the way God grows His people. They can overlap, and every season can repeat.

Knowing the names of the seasons is information. Recognizing which one you are in, while you are in it, is training. The same pressure can be refinement or recalculation. The same closed door can be release or a test. And what I mislabel, I will mistreat. If I call God's training an attack, I'll rebuke what I should embrace. If I call my own wrong turn a trial, I'll endure what I should repent of.

If I don't interpret my season, I'll only survive it instead of being trained by God in it.

Scripture holds the authority and declares what is true. Understanding the seasons helps us discern how to respond to God, wait upon the Lord, and remain faithful as His promises unfold. His Word is true before we see its fulfillment; the season trains us to trust Him while we wait.

What this manual will do

This book won't hand you the answer at the top of the page. Each of the 42 parables is a training exercise, and the book ends with nine more drawn straight from Scripture. You read the story, work the drill, make the call, and only then turn the page to the Debrief.

You won't always get it right, and that is part of training. Some stories touch two seasons. The Debrief will show you why one fits better than the other, so you learn the difference, not just the answer. Over time you'll start to notice the signs faster: in films, in Scripture, and most of all in your own life.

William Tyndale gave his life so that a boy who drives the plow could know the Scriptures. This manual is written for that boy and that girl: the plowman, the student, the parent and the worker. You don't need a title or a degree to discern the times. You need ears to hear, a Bible in your hand, and practice.

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

Matthew 16:3



A “Discernment Famine”

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

Matthew 16:3

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

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

A DISCERNMENT FAMINE

A Discernment Famine

is a season when God's people
have plenty of verses and
history but little Spirit-given
understanding of what
God is doing now.



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

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

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

— A DISCERNMENT FAMINE —

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



How to Make the Call

Every season in this manual has a deciding question. It helps you identify the primary movement of a story while recognizing where seasons overlap. You will find the questions in the Field Guide and the Debriefs. Learn them so you can explain your reasoning, not just choose a label.

SEASON	THE DECIDING QUESTION
Refinement	Is God using pressure to train the person's character, not to punish them or turn them around?
Repentance	Is the person turning from sin or a lie about themselves to agree with God's truth?
Revival	Is God's presence awakening the person to their true identity in Him and a hunger for more of Him?
Reformation	Is something in God's house being corrected and rebuilt on His Word?
Recalculate	Is God correcting a direction chosen through self-reliance or missing what He is saying?
Revolution	Is the person being sent into a hard place to represent the Kingdom, at real cost?
Release	Is the person being asked to let go of something good that has finished its season?
Reward	Is the test coming from blessing, success or power that has already arrived?
Repeat	Is God fathering you so you can give the next generation the care and discipleship you needed?

How to Make the Call

When you finish a parable, work it the way a coach breaks down film.

1. Ask the deciding questions. Run the story through all nine. Most will be an easy no. One or two may be a yes.

2. Find what God is doing. Look at the Field Guide line “What God is doing” for the seasons still standing. Which work is central to this story?

3. Put your finger on the sign. Every season leaves fingerprints. Find the sign from the Field Guide that shows up in the story, and name the moment.

4. Spot the counterfeit. Every season has an “almost right” version that sounds close to the truth and leads somewhere else. Name the counterfeit the story exposes.

5. Identify the primary movement. If two seasons fit, ask whose story it is and what the story turns on. Explain why one season has the stronger emphasis, while acknowledging the overlap.

The Debrief traces the deciding question, the evidence, the counterfeit, and the closest alternative. Compare your reasoning with it. A different answer deserves consideration when it is supported by the story and Scripture.

Discernment isn’t guessing right. It’s knowing why.

Before comparing the closest pairs, keep three movements in view: turning from sin or a lie, yielding your direction, and awakening to your identity in God.

Turning, Redirecting, and Awakening

Repentance, Recalculate, and Revival can happen in the same encounter with God. Identify the movement the story emphasizes without denying the others.

Repentance: Turning from sin or a lie

Repentance involves turning from sin or a lie you have believed about yourself. Sometimes it means confessing wrongdoing and choosing obedience. Other times, it means rejecting the belief that you are unwanted, abandoned, or required to earn your place in the Father's house.

Ask: What sin or lie must I turn from to live in agreement with God's truth?

Recalculate: Yielding your understanding and direction

You can need to recalculate without having broken a commandment. You may have leaned on your own understanding, mistaken an opportunity for an assignment, moved ahead of God's timing, or missed what He was saying. Being wise in your own eyes can make your plan seem so reasonable that you stop listening. A good intention does not guarantee the right direction.

Ask: Where have I trusted my own understanding or missed God's direction?

Revival: Awakening to your true identity

Revival includes a fresh hunger for God's presence and an awakening to who you are in Him. As the Holy Spirit opens your eyes, you begin to recognize—and live from—the identity God has given you. Repentance turns from the lie that concealed your identity. Revival emphasizes the awakening to who God created you to be.

Ask: What is God awakening me to about Himself and who I am in Him?

A person can turn from a lie, receive a corrected direction, and awaken to their identity in the same season. Explain which movement leads the story, and show the evidence for your answer.

When Two Seasons Look Alike

Refinement or Recalculate? Both can feel like pressure. Refinement emphasizes God forming your character where you are. Recalculate emphasizes correcting your direction when you have relied on your own understanding or missed His leading. Is the central work formation or redirection?

Repentance or Recalculate? Repentance turns from sin or a lie you believe about yourself. Recalculate yields a direction, timing, or assignment you misunderstood; breaking a commandment is not required. These can overlap. Is the emphasis what I must turn from, or where God is redirecting me?

Release or Reward? Both can end with letting go. Release lets go of something that has finished its season. Reward tests what blessing is doing to you while you hold it. Has its time ended, or is it testing me?

Revival or Repentance? Repentance emphasizes turning from sin or a lie. Revival emphasizes God's presence awakening you to your true identity in Him. Is the story centered on turning from the lie, or awakening to who God created you to be?

Revival or Reformation? Revival is the fire; reformation builds the fireplace. Is God awakening hearts in His presence, or rebuilding His house on His Word?

Revolution or Release? Both can mean leaving home. Revolution sends you into a place for the Kingdom. Release loosens your grip on a place that was yours. Is the story about where I'm sent, or what I'm leaving?

Repeat or Recalculate? Repeat emphasizes receiving God's fathering and giving others the care you lacked. Recalculate emphasizes correcting a direction chosen through your own understanding. Is the center raising another generation, or responding to a needed change of direction?

Repeat or anything else? Many stories have an older and a younger person in them. Repeat is the primary fit when the story turns on a blessing being passed down. Whose story is it?

How to Use This Manual

Start with the Field Guide

Before the first parable, read the Field Guide. It gives one page to each of the nine seasons: the deciding question, what God is doing, a biblical model, a key verse, the signs, and the counterfeit. Keep a finger in those pages. You'll turn back to them often, especially at first.

If you'd like help seeing where you are right now, *A Reason for Your Season* points to a free 63-question assessment at chroniclesofareformer.com/questionnaire. Take it before you begin, and again when you finish.

Work each exercise in order

1. **Read the parable.** Read it once straight through. Then read it again slowly, looking for what God is doing in the story.
2. **Work the Discernment Drill.** Five steps walk you from what happened to what it means: Observe, Examine, Expose the counterfeit, Look at your own life, and Make the call. Write your answers. Writing slows you down, and slowing down is where discernment grows.
3. **Make the call.** Circle the season you believe the parable illustrates, and write the two clues in the story that led you there. Commit to an answer before you turn the page.
4. **Turn to the Debrief.** It answers the deciding question, lays out the evidence, gives the “Almost right / Right” line, and shows

why the closest season doesn't fit as well.

5. Put it into practice. Each Debrief ends with one thing to do this week. Do it.

The parables come in no particular order, on purpose. Life doesn't announce its seasons in sequence, and neither does this book. When you finish them, Part Three takes away the movies and hands you stories from the Bible itself. That is where the training was always meant to lead: reading the Word with eyes that can tell what time it is.

Use it together

This manual works best in community, because seasons are hard to see alone. "Then those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the LORD listened to what they said" (Malachi 3:16). In a small group, read the parable aloud, give everyone a few minutes with the drill, and let each person share their call and their clues before anyone turns to the Debrief. The best conversations happen when two people pick different seasons and have to show their reasons from the story and from Scripture.

One ground rule: use the seasons to examine yourself first. Never diagnose someone else's season unless they ask for your input.

One exercise a week

There are 51 exercises in all, 42 parables and 9 Scripture drills: about a year at one a week. Go slowly. The goal is not to finish a book. It's to let God finish something in you, until you can tell what time it is and know what to do about it.

PART ONE

The Field Guide

*One page for each of the nine seasons. Turn back to
these pages whenever you work a drill.*

Season 1: Refinement

Divine Training

The deciding question: Is God using pressure to train the person's character, not to punish them or turn them around?

What God is doing: Using pressure to train you, not punish you.

Biblical model: Job. He lost almost everything and never got an explanation. What he got was an encounter: "now I have seen you with my own eyes" (Job 42:5).

But he knows where I am going. And when he tests me, I will come out as pure as gold.

Job 23:10

Signs you may be in Refinement

- Prayers seem to go unanswered, plans fall apart, and the promise looks further away.
- God has put you in over your head, so you learn to rely on Him.
- You are in a hidden place, faithful in small things no one sees.
- The pressure is working on your character more than your circumstances.

The counterfeit: treating refinement as punishment, or settling for grape juice: sweet, fast and skipping the crushing. Watch for defensiveness, pride, avoiding the truth, or lowering your theology to match your pain.

Season 2: Repentance

Orphans No More

The deciding question: Is the person turning from sin or a lie about themselves to agree with God's truth?

What God is doing: Turning you from sin and lies to live as His child.

Biblical model: The Prodigal Son. He came home rehearsing a speech about becoming a hired servant, and his father ran to him with a robe, a ring and sandals (Luke 15:20–22).

But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.

1 John 1:9

Signs you may be in Repentance

- You are living like an orphan in the Father's house.
- A hidden secret keeps pulling you back into hiding.
- You are “washing the windows,” serving to earn a place you already have.
- God is exposing a lie you have believed about Him.

The counterfeit: sorry without change. Remorse looks at what I did. Repentance changes my mind and hands my past to God. Watch for the two orphans: the rebellious one subtracts from God's Word; the religious one adds to it. And watch for mixed-up fathers: trusting the false father's voice, or blaming God for wounds someone else caused.

Season 3: Revival

The Cost of Discipleship

The deciding question: Is God's presence awakening the person to their true identity in Him and a hunger for more of Him?

What God is doing: Awakening you to His presence and your identity in Him.

Biblical model: Peter leaving his nets. He walked away from the boat and the business to follow Jesus, and on the day of Pentecost the fisherman preached and three thousand were saved.

As they listen, their secret thoughts will be exposed, and they will fall to their knees and worship God, declaring, "God is truly here among you."

1 Corinthians 14:25

Signs you may be in Revival

- A fresh hunger for God's presence, more than His gifts.
- A call to lay down a good thing to follow Him wholeheartedly.
- Prayer is moving from a duty to a necessity.
- God is uncovering your true identity and what has filled in your wells.

The counterfeit: hype and noise. Revival isn't when you cry; revival is when you change. Treating the Holy Spirit as a power to use rather than a Person to know is almost right.

Season 4: Reformation

Restoring the House

The deciding question: Is something in God's house being corrected and rebuilt on His Word?

What God is doing: Rebuilding your life and church on His Word.

Biblical model: King Josiah. When the Book of the Law was found in the Temple, he tore his robes, read it to the people, and tore down every idol in the land (2 Kings 22–23).

Never before had there been a king like Josiah, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and soul and strength, obeying all the laws of Moses.

2 Kings 23:25

Signs you may be in Reformation

- Scripture is exposing traditions that have replaced truth.
- You are moving from consumer to contributor, from marketplace to house of prayer.
- You are being asked to stand on the Word when it costs you.
- God is restoring something He designed that has been lost.

The counterfeit: deconstruction without reconstruction. Tearing down what is false is only half the work. A critical spirit can also masquerade as discernment, and reformation that forgets mercy only produces a new kind of Pharisee.

Season 5: Recalculate

Why Revival Tarries

The deciding question: Is God correcting a direction chosen through self-reliance or missing what He is saying?

What God is doing: Correcting your direction as you yield your understanding.

Biblical model: Israel's 40 years. An eleven-day trip became forty years in the wilderness. The people trusted their fear more than God's promise (Numbers 14).

Remember how the LORD your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands.

Deuteronomy 8:2

Signs you may be in Recalculate

- You keep circling the same mountain.
- Fear, comfort or a person has quietly taken the wheel.
- Your own understanding has replaced listening for His direction.
- You are trusting a voice other than God's.

The counterfeit: mislabeling the wilderness. Recalculating feels like delay, so we call it the enemy's attack, when God is lovingly turning us around. Sometimes God will destroy our plans when He sees that our plans are going to destroy us.

Season 6: Revolution

Driven by Eternity

The deciding question: Is the person being sent into a hard place to represent the Kingdom, at real cost?

What God is doing: Sending you into your sphere to represent His Kingdom.

Biblical model: Daniel. Carried into Babylon as a young man, he “was determined not to defile himself” (Daniel 1:8) and served pagan kings with an excellent spirit for decades. Babylon wasn’t his failure. It was his assignment.

But the people who know their God will be strong and will resist him.

Daniel 11:32

Signs you may be in Revolution

- You are being sent into a place where faith is costly.
- Your everyday work is turning from a waiting room into an assignment on the mountain where God placed you.
- Eternity is reordering how you spend your life and resources.
- You are called to stand faithful when the miracle hasn’t come.

The counterfeit: a performance instead of a calling. A gift that is well stewarded wins favor with people; intimacy and obedience win favor with God. The anointing is a gift; authority comes from relationship. This isn’t about politics or power. It’s about presence.

Season 7: Release

Divine Pruning

The deciding question: Is the person being asked to let go of something good that has finished its season?

What God is doing: Cutting away what has finished its season.

Biblical model: Paul and Barnabas. The Holy Spirit set them apart to serve together (Acts 13:2). Years later, after a sharp disagreement, they went separate ways (Acts 15:39). The gospel went out in two directions instead of one.

He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more.

John 15:2

Signs you may be in Release

- Something still looks green outside but is dying inside.
- God is asking for something good, not something sinful.
- You expect things to work “as before” in a season God has ended.
- You are still mourning a Saul God has already set aside.

The counterfeit: holding on to what has finished, or running away and calling it release. Release is not losing what you love; it is letting go of what is slowly killing you.

Season 8: Reward

Surviving the Anointing

The deciding question: Is the test coming from blessing, success or power that has already arrived?

What God is doing: Testing your character with blessing.

Biblical model: Joseph in Egypt. Thirteen years after the dream, he was second only to Pharaoh, and the power he was given became the means to save the very brothers who sold him (Genesis 45).

Fire tests the purity of silver and gold, but a person is tested by being praised.

Proverbs 27:21

Signs you may be in Reward

- Promotion, influence, money or applause has arrived.
- Prayers are being answered faster than your character can keep up.
- Success is offering you the credit.
- The question has changed from “Will you survive the fire?” to “Will you steward the gold?”

The counterfeit: treating blessing as proof of approval. Sometimes success is not the reward; sometimes success is the test. As Peter Vescovi puts it, “In the world power is the goal; in the Kingdom power is the test.” The true reward is God Himself.

Season 9: Repeat

Doing for others what was not done for you

The deciding question: Is God fathering you so you can give the next generation the care and discipleship you needed?

What God is doing: Fathering you where you were not fathered, so you can disciple a generation.

God is a Father to the fatherless (Psalm 68:5). What you lacked does not have to determine what the next generation receives. As God fathers and forms you, you can do for others what was not done for you.

You become the prescription for others who have been rejected—the very care you once needed. You offer the instruction, encouragement, correction, protection, and belonging missing from your own story. The wound does not have to become the inheritance. Through God’s care, a different inheritance can begin with you.

“Good people leave an inheritance to their grandchildren, but the sinner’s wealth passes to the godly.”

Proverbs 13:22 (NLT)

I see an application in spiritual fatherhood: those orphaned by incompetent or unfaithful parents, leaders, or coaches now receive the care they needed through people God has prepared. What others neglected becomes our responsibility to nurture.

Biblical model: Paul and Timothy. Paul called Timothy “my true son in the faith” (1 Timothy 1:2) and trained him to pass on what he received. Second Timothy 2:2 calls him to entrust that teaching to faithful people who can teach others.

Signs you may be in Repeat

God is restoring your understanding of Him as Father.

You recognize another person’s unmet need because you lived it.

You are choosing to give the care you once lacked.

Someone younger needs your presence, example, and discipleship.

The counterfeit: Withholding care because nobody gave it to you, or repeating the neglect and rejection you experienced. Repeat fulfills its purpose when God’s fathering becomes care for others. You receive from Him, become what you needed, and help raise a generation.

PART TWO

The Training Exercises

*Read the parable. Work the drill. Make the call.
Then turn the page.*

PARABLE 1

Miracles from Heaven

Three Kinds of People Around a Miracle

Miracles from Heaven (2016) is based on the true story of the Beam family of Texas. Their daughter Annabel, played in the film by Kylie Rogers, develops a rare, incurable digestive disorder. She can't eat normally and lives in constant pain. Her mother, Christy, played by Jennifer Garner, fights her way to a specialist in Boston and wears herself out caring for her. Along the way, Christy loses her faith. She stops being able to pray.

Then Anna falls about thirty feet headfirst into a hollow cottonwood tree. Firefighters work for hours to free her. She comes out with only a mild concussion. Afterward she says she went to heaven and that God told her she would be healed. Soon her symptoms are gone.

As a parable, watch the people in the pews more than the girl in the tree. Three kinds of people gather around every miracle.

The first are the accusers. While Anna is sick, some in Christy's church suggest the family's sin might be the cause. The second are the doubters. When Christy tells the church what happened, some refuse to believe it. The third are the witnesses. In the congregation that day sits Ben, the father of Haley, a girl Anna befriended in the hospital. Haley had died. Ben didn't get the miracle he prayed for, yet he came all the way from Boston to stand with the Beams and tell them Haley died in peace.

The accusers had a tradition: if someone is suffering, someone must have sinned. That idea is older than the film. In John 9 the disciples look at a man born blind and ask, “Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?” (John 9:2). Jesus throws out the question: “This happened so the power of God could be seen in him” (John 9:3). Then the Pharisees interrogate the healed man until he gives the simplest testimony in the Bible: “I was blind, and now I can see!” (John 9:25).

Notice that the accusers and the doubters are doing the same thing from opposite sides. One explains suffering away with blame. The other explains healing away with suspicion. Both are tearing down, and neither one builds anything a hurting family can stand on.

The Church has too many accusers and too many skeptics. It is time for God’s house to be rebuilt with witnesses: people who rejoice in His power, honor those still waiting, and keep believing either way. Ben is the picture. He had every reason to stay home. He came anyway.

PARABLE 1

Discernment Drill

Miracles from Heaven

1. **Observe.** List the three responses people in Christy's church give, first to Anna's sickness and then to her healing.

2. **Examine.** Where did the accusers' idea come from, and what does Jesus do with that same idea in John 9? Who in this story needs to change the most?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** The accusers and the doubters disagree about almost everything. What do they have in common?

4. **Look at your own life.** When someone you know is suffering, what is the first question that rises in you?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Miracles from Heaven

Season 4: Reformation · Restoring the House

The deciding question: Is something in God's house being corrected and rebuilt on His Word?

Yes. The parable isn't aimed at Christy. It's aimed at the church, and at an old tradition, "suffering means someone sinned," that Jesus overturned in John 9.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: rebuilding the house on His Word.** The accusers' tradition gets measured against Jesus' answer and found wanting. That is the work of this season: "rebuilding your life and church on His Word."
- **The sign: Scripture exposing a tradition that replaced truth.** "Was it because of his own sins?" sounds spiritual. John 9:3 shows it was never God's way of seeing suffering.
- **The counterfeit: tearing down without building.** The accusers blame and the doubters scoff. Both take apart, and neither builds. That is this season's counterfeit, "deconstruction without reconstruction." Ben is the reconstruction: a witness who honors God's power and those still waiting.

Almost right: Somebody must have sinned.

Right: God wants to show Himself here, and I'll stand with them while He does.

Why not Refinement?

Christy's long fight, her unanswered prayers and her lost ability to pray all belong to Refinement, and the first half of the film lives there. But this parable doesn't follow Christy through the fire. It turns to the people in the pews and asks what their response is built on. When the story corrects the house rather than training one person in it, it's Reformation.

Put it into practice

Think of someone still waiting for their miracle. This week, go stand with them the way Ben did, with no explanation and no accusation.

PARABLE 2

The Art of War

Worn Out on Purpose

About 2,500 years ago, the Chinese general Sun Tzu wrote *The Art of War*. One of his core ideas is that a wise general wins before the battle begins. You harass a rested enemy, cut off his supplies and wear down his will, so that when the fight comes he has nothing left. And, “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.”

As a parable, Sun Tzu describes the enemy’s playbook against God’s people. Daniel saw a power that would “wear out the saints of the most High” (Daniel 7:25, KJV). The devil rarely has to defeat a believer head-on. He only needs to keep him exhausted, discouraged and busy until he stops believing God’s promises are for him.

Pharaoh used that exact strategy. When Moses came with the word that God would set Israel free, Pharaoh took away the straw and kept the brick quota the same. “Load them down with more work. Make them sweat! That will teach them to listen to lies!” (Exodus 5:9). It worked. The foremen stopped blaming Pharaoh and turned on Moses (Exodus 5:20–21). The promise had just been spoken, and the people were worse off than before they heard it.

Many of us have lived Exodus 5. God speaks a word over your life, and the very next week the load doubles. Prayers seem to go unanswered. The promise looks further away than it did before He

spoke it. And the weary start to lower what they believe to match what they feel.

But the enemy is not the only one at work in the brickyard. Joseph told the brothers who sold him, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good” (Genesis 50:20). The same pressure the enemy uses to wear you out, God uses to train you. The enemy wants you exhausted. God wants you to learn to see. “When your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow” (James 1:3).

Elisha’s servant woke up one morning to find an army surrounding the city. “Oh, sir, what will we do now?” Elisha prayed, “O LORD, open his eyes and let him see!” And the servant saw the hillside “filled with horses and chariots of fire” (2 Kings 6:15–17). Nothing about the enemy army changed. The servant’s sight did. That is what the pressure was for.

If you’re worn out, you may be closer to freedom than you think. Knowing the strategy takes the sting out. Ask God to open your eyes. “There are more on our side than on theirs!” (2 Kings 6:16).

PARABLE 2

Discernment Drill

The Art of War

1. **Observe.** What happened to the Hebrew slaves right after Moses brought God's word of freedom? What did the foremen do next?

2. **Examine.** Who is applying the pressure in this parable, and who else is at work in the same pressure? What changed for Elisha's servant, and what stayed the same?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** When the bricks pile up the week after God spoke, what would "almost right" sound like in a tired believer's head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Where has busyness or exhaustion made you stop believing a promise God gave you?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

The Art of War

Season 1: Refinement · Divine Training

The deciding question: Is God using pressure to train the person's character, not to punish them or turn them around?

Yes. Nobody in this story took a wrong road, and nobody is being punished. The enemy means the load to wear the people out. God uses the same load to open their eyes.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: training through pressure, not punishing.** What the enemy “intended to harm,” God “intended for good.” Elisha’s servant came out of that morning seeing what he had never seen. That is this season’s work: “using pressure to train you, not punish you.”
- **The sign: the promise looks further away.** The word of freedom was spoken, and the bricks doubled. The first sign on the Refinement page says it almost word for word: “prayers seem to go unanswered, plans fall apart, and the promise looks further away.”
- **The counterfeit: lowering your theology to match your pain.** The foremen turned on Moses and stopped believing the word. The enemy wins when we decide God’s promises aren’t for us because the week got harder.

Almost right: It got harder, so God must not be in it.

Right: It got harder, and God is opening my eyes in it.

Why not Revolution?

Moses walked into Pharaoh’s court with a word from God, and that is a Revolution picture. But this parable doesn’t follow the one who was sent. It stays in the brickyard with the people under the load, and with a servant who needs his eyes opened. When the story is about how the weary hold on under pressure, it’s Refinement.

Put it into practice

Write down one promise of God you have stopped believing because you are tired. This week, pray Elisha’s prayer over yourself, “Lord, open my eyes,” and take one real hour of rest before you go back to the fight.

The Flash (2023)

The Groceries on the Higher Shelf

In the 2023 film *The Flash*, Barry Allen is a grown man and a member of the Justice League, but part of him is still a boy standing in his mother's kitchen. Years ago, Nora Allen sent her husband out to the store for groceries she had forgotten. While he was gone, she was killed. Henry Allen was convicted of her murder, and Barry has spent his life trying to prove his father innocent.

Then Barry discovers he can run fast enough to travel back in time. He goes back to that day and makes one small change: he slips the missing groceries into his mother's shopping cart, so his father never has to leave the house. When he comes back, his mother is alive.

But the world is broken. The heroes who should be there are gone. When an old enemy attacks, there is no one to stop him. Barry runs back again and again, trying to fix each new disaster, and every attempt makes things worse. Worst of all, a dark, twisted speedster keeps hunting him. In the end, Barry learns who it is: a version of himself who never stopped running back to fix the past. He refused to let go, and it turned him into the very thing that was destroying the world.

So Barry makes the hardest choice of his life. He goes back to that grocery store and undoes his change. He lets his mother go. And

before he leaves, he moves the groceries to a higher shelf, so that when his father reaches up for them, the store's security camera finally catches his face. Back in the present, that footage proves Henry was at the store. His father walks free.

As a parable, notice what Barry was holding on to. It wasn't a sin. It was his mother, the most innocent love of his life. Nothing was wrong with loving her. What was wrong was refusing to let a season God had allowed to end stay ended.

Many of us keep running back to the kitchen. We replay the conversation, rewrite the decision, relive the loss, sure that one small change would fix everything. Some of us have spent years trying to rescue a season God has already closed. And the longer we hold on, the more we risk becoming our own dark speedster, so bound to the past that we can't be who we were made to be in the present.

Paul had more in his past to regret than most of us. Yet he wrote, "I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race" (Philippians 3:13–14). God said through Isaiah, "But forget all that—it is nothing compared to what I am going to do. For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?" (Isaiah 43:18–19).

Barry never stopped loving his mother. Letting go is not the same as forgetting. He simply trusted that some things are not his to undo. And watch what happened when he opened his hand: the

very thing he couldn't fix by holding on, his father's freedom, came by letting go.

What you release to the Father is never lost with Him.

NOTES

PARABLE 3

Discernment Drill

The Flash (2023)

1. **Observe.** What one change did Barry make, and what did it cost the world? Who did the dark speedster turn out to be?

2. **Examine.** What did each trip back cost, and what was Barry really trying to get back? What finally freed his father, and how was that connected to his last choice in the store?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Standing in the grocery store with the groceries in his hand, what would “almost right” sound like in Barry’s head?

4. **Look at your own life.** What kitchen do you keep running back to? What past moment are you still trying to rewrite?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

The Flash (2023)

Season 7: Release · Divine Pruning

The deciding question: Is the person being asked to let go of something good that has finished its season?

Yes. Barry's mother is the purest good in his life, and her time on earth has ended. Every attempt to keep her breaks something else.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: cutting away what has finished its season.** Barry's grief was never the problem. Refusing to let the past be past was. When he opens his hand, the fruit comes: his father walks free. That is pruning, cutting so there will be more fruit.
- **The sign: expecting it to work "as before."** Barry keeps running back to make his life work the way it did before the loss. The Release page names that sign: "you expect things to work 'as before' in a season God has ended."
- **The counterfeit: holding on to what has finished.** The dark speedster is Barry if he never lets go. He is the counterfeit of this season walking around in a suit.

Almost right: If I could change that one moment, everything would be fixed.

Right: I release what God has allowed to end, and trust Him with what comes next.

Why not Repentance?

Barry's turning point is a change of mind, so Repentance is a fair guess. But Repentance turns from a sin or a lie. Barry isn't turning from sin. He is letting go of someone good and deeply loved. When what has to go is good but finished, it's Release.

Put it into practice

Name one moment you keep replaying. This week, tell God out loud that you release it to Him, tears and all, and ask Him what new thing He has already begun.

PARABLE 4

The Defiant Ones

Somebody Heard the Tape

The Defiant Ones (2017) is a four-part HBO documentary about two unlikely partners: Jimmy Iovine, a record producer from Brooklyn who worked with Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty and Stevie Nicks, and Dr. Dre, the producer from Compton who helped build N.W.A. Different coasts, different worlds. Together they would change the music business and later build Beats.

Early on, Dre finished an album that would become *The Chronic*. Label after label passed on it. His legal troubles scared them, and so did the kind of music it was. Then Iovine heard it, and he saw right away what others had missed. He put it out on his young label, Interscope, and it became one of the most important albums of its time.

Years later, the tables turned. Dre's new label was struggling. His first releases flopped, and there was pressure to drop him. Then Iovine played him a demo tape an intern had passed along, from a young rapper out of Detroit no one had heard of. Dre loved it. He wanted to meet him right away, and had a contract drawn up within a day. Plenty of people around them objected. Dre trusted his instincts. The young man on the tape was Eminem. And in time, Eminem would go looking for the next unknown voice himself.

As a parable, follow the tape, not the money. Iovine heard Dre when no one would. Dre heard Eminem when no one would.

Eminem went looking for the next one. What was done for each man became what he did for the next. The blessing didn't stop with any of them. It kept moving down the line.

That is how the Kingdom is supposed to work. After Saul of Tarsus met Jesus, the believers in Jerusalem were afraid of him. "They did not believe he had truly become a believer! Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles" (Acts 9:26–27). Barnabas heard the tape when no one else would. Years later, when a young man named John Mark turned back partway through a mission trip, Barnabas believed in him too. And near the end of his life, Paul, the man Barnabas had vouched for, wrote, "Bring Mark with you when you come, for he will be helpful to me in my ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11). Barnabas believed in Paul. Paul came to believe in Mark. The chain held.

The Church needs more people who will listen to the tape. Too often we pass on the ones with a messy past, a strange sound or the wrong background. We wait until someone is proven before we invest. But somebody took a chance on you once. Maybe it was a coach, a pastor, a teacher or a friend. Before any of them, it was God Himself, who sent Christ to die for us "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8).

Who are you listening for? Somewhere there is a young man or woman with a demo tape no one has played. Be the one who hears it.

PARABLE 4

Discernment Drill

The Defiant Ones

1. **Observe.** Who believed in Dre when others passed? Who did Dre believe in when others objected? What did Eminem do later?

2. **Examine.** Trace what moved from one person to the next in this story, and in the Barnabas story. What stayed the same each time it was handed on?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** What would “almost right” sound like in someone who waits until a young person has proven themselves before investing in them?

4. **Look at your own life.** Who heard your “tape” when no one else would? Whose tape are you not listening to?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

The Defiant Ones

Season 9: Repeat · Break the Cycle

The deciding question: Is God fathering you so you can give the next generation the care and discipleship you needed?

Yes. The story is a chain: Iovine to Dre, Dre to Eminem, Eminem to the next unknown voice. Barnabas to Paul, Paul to Mark. What matters is what each one passed on.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: making you a father or mother to the next generation.** Each man stood in the gap for someone younger the way someone once stood for him. That is the heart of this season.
- **The sign: someone younger is watching how you live.** Eminem didn't just get signed. He watched what Dre did and went and did it for someone else. In Repeat, the next generation learns from what we do more than from what we say.
- **The counterfeit: repeating what was done to you because it's familiar.** The industry's habit was to pass on the risky ones, and Dre had been passed on himself. Instead of repeating that, he did for the next voice what Iovine had done for him.

Almost right: I'll invest in them once they've proven themselves.

Right: Somebody believed in me first, so I'll believe in them now.

Why not Reward?

This story is full of hits, fame and money, so Reward is a reasonable guess. But Reward is decided by what blessing does to your character after it arrives. This story never turns on that. It turns on what each man did for the next unknown voice. When the turning point is what gets handed down, it's Repeat.

Put it into practice

Think of one young person whose gift others have overlooked. This week, listen to them, really listen, and tell them what you hear in them.

PARABLE 5

The Devil Wears Prada 2

Returning to What You Were Released From

In *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), Andy Sachs is a young journalist who takes a job as assistant to Miranda Priestly, the cold and powerful editor of the fashion magazine *Runway*. Andy doesn't care about fashion, but she wants the job on her résumé. Little by little, she changes. She dresses the part, answers the phone at all hours, steps over a coworker to get ahead, and neglects the people who love her. One day she realizes she is becoming Miranda. In Paris, she walks away. When Miranda calls, Andy tosses her phone into a fountain.

The first story warned us about the cost of serving image, power, intimidation and ambition without conscience. It showed how easily a person can lose pieces of themselves when they keep compromising for proximity to influence.

Then came the sequel. In *The Devil Wears Prada 2* (2026), twenty years have passed. Andy is a respected journalist until her newsroom is laid off. The owner of *Runway's* parent company hires her back as features editor. Miranda is under fire and her position is shaky. Andy works her way into the inner circle again, and in the end she finds the buyer who saves the company. Miranda gets the promotion she wanted, and returns to work as imperious as ever. Andy gets a nicer office.

That's what feels spiritually backwards about it. Andy doesn't appear to return to dismantle the system that shaped and wounded her. She returns to strengthen Miranda's position within it. If the sequel reframes Andy's growth as loyalty to Miranda instead of freedom from that system, then it subtly teaches people to protect the very spirit they were once delivered from.

As a parable, this is an old story. God brought Israel out of Egypt with signs and wonders. But in the wilderness, when things got hard, they said, "Let's choose a new leader and go back to Egypt!" (Numbers 14:4). They remembered the fish and the cucumbers. They forgot the whips. Many of us do the same. We are delivered from a toxic workplace, a controlling relationship or a performance-driven church culture, and years later we drift back, sure that this time we're strong enough to handle it. Paul warned the Galatians: "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).

And that is where discernment matters. Not every powerful figure is worth preserving. Not every empire deserves saving.

Sometimes the most faithful thing you can do is refuse to empower what God once gave you the courage to leave.

PARABLE 5

Discernment Drill

The Devil Wears Prada 2

1. **Observe.** What did Andy walk away from at the end of the first film? What does she end up doing for Miranda in the second?

2. **Examine.** Put the end of the first film beside the end of the second. Which direction is Andy moving in each, and what pulled her back?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** The day the offer comes, what would “almost right” sound like in Andy’s head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a place or relationship you once walked away from that you’ve been tempted to go back to? What makes it look better from a distance than it really was?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

The Devil Wears Prada 2

Season 5: Recalculate · Why Revival Tarries

The deciding question: Is God correcting a direction chosen through self-reliance or missing what He is saying?

Yes, and that is the warning. God once gave Andy the courage to walk out. Twenty years later, a layoff and an attractive offer put her back on the road toward the same system. That wrong turn is what calls for Recalculate.

The evidence

- **Back toward Egypt.** Andy returns to support the system she once walked away from. Her return illustrates the need to Recalculate: God rerouting you when your plan overrules His.
- **A voice other than God's.** Security, status and an offer that sounds like a comeback take the wheel. A better position does not necessarily mean a better direction.
- **Rehabilitation without repentance.** The old system is preserved rather than challenged. Andy's greater influence helps sustain what previously led her to compromise.

Almost right: I'm strong enough now to go back.

Right: I won't empower what God gave me the courage to leave.

The contrast: Release and Recalculate

The first film illustrates **Release**: Andy recognizes the cost of compromise and walks away. The sequel illustrates the **need to Recalculate**: she returns to strengthen the system she previously escaped.

Returning is the wrong turn; Recalculate is the correction that wrong turn calls for. The sequel shows why she needs that correction, not necessarily that she has accepted it. What looks like a comeback can take you back toward bondage.

Put it into practice

Name one thing God once gave you the courage to leave. Write down why you left. If you are heading back toward the same compromise, what change of direction is needed?

PARABLE 6

The Prince of Egypt

Two Brothers and a Palace

In DreamWorks' *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), Moses and Rameses grow up as brothers in Pharaoh's palace. They race chariots through the streets, wreck a temple under construction and laugh off the scolding together. Rameses is the heir. Moses is the beloved younger brother. Then Moses learns where he came from: he's a Hebrew, saved from the river as a baby, and the slaves building Egypt's monuments are his own people.

Everything changes. After he accidentally kills an Egyptian guard, Moses runs into the desert. Rameses begs him to stay and promises that, as Pharaoh's son, he can make it all go away. Moses leaves anyway. Years later he comes back with a word from God, and the two brothers stand on opposite sides of the Red Sea. Rameses screams his name from the shore. Moses quietly says goodbye.

As a parable, look at what Moses had to let go of. Not a vice. A home. A name. A brother he loved and laughed with. The palace had been good to him, and Rameses was not lying when he said he could make it all go away. But that season was over, and staying would have meant losing the reason he was born.

Two brothers raised in the same house made two different choices. One held on to the palace and lost everything. The other let it go and found his calling. Scripture says it plainly: "It was by faith that Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's

daughter. He chose to share the oppression of God's people instead of enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin" (Hebrews 11:24–25). *Fleeting* is the key word. The palace was real, but its time was short.

Moses wasn't the first prince of Egypt in the Bible. Joseph was carried into Egypt by brothers who sold him, and rose to a palace too. He told those brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good" (Genesis 50:20). Joseph went into the palace to save his family. Moses walked out of it to save his. Neither of them belonged to the palace. They belonged to God.

Some of us are still in Pharaoh's house, comfortable and celebrated, while God is calling us out. Letting go is costly. Sometimes it costs a brother. But the One who calls you out will never leave you in the desert alone.

PARABLE 6

Discernment Drill

The Prince of Egypt

1. **Observe.** What did Moses have in the palace? What did Rameses offer him to stay?

2. **Examine.** Why did Moses refuse the offer when Rameses could have fixed everything? What does Hebrews 11 mean by calling the palace's pleasures "fleeting"?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** When Rameses says he can make it all go away, what would "almost right" sound like in Moses' head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a comfortable place, title or relationship you're holding on to after God has started calling you out?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

The Prince of Egypt

Season 7: Release · Divine Pruning

The deciding question: Is the person being asked to let go of something good that has finished its season?

Yes. The palace gave Moses a home, a name and a brother. Its season was over, and the story ends with a goodbye across the sea.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: cutting away what has finished its season.** The palace had raised Moses, but it could not keep him. God was cutting away a whole chapter of his life so the work he was born for could begin.
- **The sign: God is asking for something good, not something sinful.** The hardest thing Moses lost wasn't Egypt's gold. It was Rameses. Release so often asks for something you genuinely love.
- **The counterfeit: holding on to what has finished.** Rameses held on to the palace and lost everything. He is the picture of the counterfeit this season warns against.

Almost right: keeping my place in the palace.

Right: keeping my place with God's people.

Why not Revolution?

Moses comes back to Egypt with a word from God and stands before the most powerful man in the land. That is a Revolution picture, being sent into a hard place for the Kingdom. But this parable is built around what Moses leaves: the palace, the name and the brother. When the story turns on letting go of a place that was yours, it's Release.

Put it into practice

Ask God this week whether there is a comfortable place you're holding on to after He has called you out. Write down one step you can take to let it go.

PARABLE 7

American Idol

Audition or Adoption?

American Idol has been on television since 2002. Thousands of hopeful singers line up for auditions. Judges decide in seconds who gets a golden ticket to Hollywood and who gets sent home. Week after week, the audience votes, and one by one the contestants are eliminated until one star is left standing. It makes great television. You are only as good as your last performance.

As a parable, many people experience church the same way. When being part of a church culture feels more like trying out for *American Idol* than being adopted into a healthy, loving family, we have elevated entertainment over encounters with God. The gifted get the spotlight. The rest of us watch. Everyone learns, without anyone saying it, that you have to keep earning your place.

That is an orphan system with a worship band. “So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children” (Romans 8:15). Sons don’t audition. “Now you are no longer a slave but God’s own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir” (Galatians 4:7).

The prodigal son came home with an audition speech already rehearsed: “I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant” (Luke 15:19). He never got to finish it. His father ran, embraced him and called for the robe, the ring

and the sandals (Luke 15:22). The father wasn't looking for a performer. He was looking for his son.

Gifts are real, and stewarding them will bring favor with people. But intimacy and obedience bring favor with God. Results show God can use a man. Fruit shows God can change a man.

The answer is a church that looks like a family table instead of a talent show. Put away the scorecards. Nobody in the Father's house is waiting to be voted off.

PARABLE 7

Discernment Drill

American Idol

1. **Observe.** What earns a place on the stage in this story, and who is left in the seats watching?

2. **Examine.** The prodigal came home with a speech already rehearsed. What did the speech assume about his father, and what did the father do with it?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** What would “almost right” look like for a gifted believer who keeps performing to stay in the spotlight?

4. **Look at your own life.** Where are you serving God to be seen rather than serving because you belong?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

American Idol

Season 2: Repentance · Orphans No More

The deciding question: Is the person turning from sin or a lie about themselves to agree with God's truth?

Yes. The problem isn't the talent show on the stage. It's the lie inside the heart: "I have to keep earning my place."

The evidence

- **Belonging has become an audition.** People keep performing to earn a place in the Father's house. This matches the season's warning: living like an orphan and serving to earn a place you already have.
- **The Father offers adoption.** Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:7 place identity in being God's child, not in winning the spotlight. The needed change is turning from a performance-based view of belonging to the truth of sonship.
- **The prodigal comes home.** He rehearses a speech about becoming a hired servant, but his father receives him as a son. This is the biblical model for Repentance in this book: Orphans No More.

Almost right: I must keep performing to earn my place.

Right: I serve because I belong to the Father.

Where it overlaps: Reformation

The call to replace a church talent show with a family table also points to Reformation: restoring the church to God's design. Repentance addresses the orphan thinking in the person; Reformation addresses the culture that teaches people to audition for belonging.

The main movement here is from audition to adoption. That makes Repentance the strongest fit. Reformation is the overlap as the church learns to nurture sons and daughters rather than reward performers.

Put it into practice

Name one way you have tried to earn your place with God. Read Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:7. Turn from that lie, thank the Father that you are His child, and serve this week from belonging rather than for approval.

PARABLE 8

Click

The Remote That Took the Wheel

In *Click* (2006), Adam Sandler plays Michael Newman, an architect who keeps promising his family that life will slow down after the next big promotion. His wife, his two kids and his aging parents keep getting what is left of him.

One night, fed up with a drawer full of remotes, he goes looking for a universal one. A strange man named Morty hands him a prototype and warns him it can't be returned. It turns out to control Michael's whole life. He can mute an argument, pause the world, and fast-forward through traffic, a cold, a fight with his wife. While he skips ahead, his body keeps going on autopilot.

At first it feels like freedom. Then the remote starts learning what he likes to skip, and it begins fast-forwarding on its own. Michael jumps ahead a year, then a decade. He misses his children growing up. His marriage ends. He misses the last moments with his father, a man he kept putting off. Years go by in what feels to him like minutes, until he is old, sick and dying, watching his grown son make the same choice he made: work first, family later. With his last strength, he chases his son into the rain and begs him to put his family first.

Then Michael wakes up. It is 2006 again. He runs home, tells his parents he loves them, and gives his family his time. When the remote shows up on his kitchen counter, he throws it away.

As a parable, *Click* is a picture of how a life ends up on the wrong road without anyone choosing it. Michael never decided to miss his kids. He just made a plan, promotion first and family later, and then kept skipping the slow parts and the inconvenient people. One day the habit started driving. Comfort took the wheel. Ambition took the wheel. And he woke up somewhere he never meant to go.

The prophet Haggai spoke to people who had put their own houses ahead of God's: "Look at what's happening to you! You have planted much but harvest little" (Haggai 1:5–6). God wasn't out to shame them. He was telling them to stop and look at where their road was taking them. Paul wrote, "So be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days" (Ephesians 5:15–16).

Many of us, and many churches, are living on fast-forward: always building toward the next thing, always missing the people in the room. But the good news of *Click* is the good news of the gospel. Michael gets to wake up. Jonah ran the other way and ended up in the belly of a fish, and the Scripture says, "Then the LORD spoke to Jonah a second time" (Jonah 3:1).

Sometimes God will destroy our plans when He sees that our plans are going to destroy us. If He is waking you up, it isn't too late. Put the remote down. Turn around. Live today the way you'll wish you had.

PARABLE 8

Discernment Drill

Click

1. **Observe.** What was Michael’s plan for his family at the start? What did the remote start doing on its own?

2. **Examine.** How did Michael end up so far from the life he wanted, when he never chose to miss it? What did he see in his son that frightened him?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Before the remote ever showed up, what was Michael already telling his family? Why does that sound almost right?

4. **Look at your own life.** What part of your life have you been “fast-forwarding” through, and who keeps getting what’s left of you?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

Click

Season 5: Recalculate · Why Revival Tarries

The deciding question: Is God correcting a direction chosen through self-reliance or missing what He is saying?

Yes. Michael's plan, "after the next promotion," put him on the wrong road, comfort kept him there, and the wake-up turns him around.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: rerouting you when your plan overrules His.** Michael's plan, work first and family later, quietly overruled everything that mattered. Waking up in 2006 is a merciful reroute while there is still time.
- **The sign: fear, comfort or a person has quietly taken the wheel.** The remote learns what Michael likes to skip and starts choosing for him. That is comfort taking the wheel, as plainly as a movie can show it.
- **The counterfeit: mislabeling the wilderness.** Michael called the remote freedom. It was the road away from everything he loved. Recalculate's counterfeit calls the wrong road good and the correction an attack.

Almost right: I'll slow down once things settle.

Right: I'll live today the way I'll wish I had.

Why not Repentance?

Michael's wake-up is a real change of mind, so Repentance is a fair guess. But Michael isn't an orphan who needs to learn he is loved. His problem is direction: a road his own plan chose, and years he can't get back. When the story turns on getting off the wrong road, it's Recalculate.

Put it into practice

Pick one person you have been putting off. Before the week is over, give them unhurried time, with your phone out of reach.

PARABLE 9

The Counterfeit Handbag

Nobody Fakes What's Worthless

Walk through certain street markets in any big city and you'll find tables full of designer handbags at a fraction of the price. The logos look right. The stitching is close. Some fakes are so good that an untrained eye can't tell the difference. A skilled seller can even talk a buyer into believing the fake is real and the real one is fake.

But notice what nobody counterfeits. No one fakes a plastic grocery bag. Counterfeits are only made of what is valuable. The fake is a backhanded compliment to the real.

As a parable, that matters for the Church. Many believers have seen counterfeit prophecy, counterfeit healing, and counterfeit spiritual leaders who used the things of God to profit from people. The temptation is to throw it all out. If there are fakes, maybe it was all fake. Whole churches have quietly made that their tradition: we don't do the gifts here. But the enemy doesn't counterfeit worthless things. The fact that there are false prophets proves there is a true prophetic voice worth having.

Paul gave the balanced answer: "Do not scoff at prophecies, but test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:20–21). Don't scoff. Do test. Keep the real.

When Moses and Aaron stood before Pharaoh, Aaron threw down his staff and it became a serpent. Pharaoh's magicians did the same with their secret arts. A counterfeit, right there in the throne room. "But then Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs" (Exodus 7:12). The real doesn't need to fear the fake. It just needs to show up.

Jesus didn't abandon the Temple because of the money changers. He cleansed it. Cleansing doesn't burn the house down to get rid of the fakes. It sorts what is false from what is true and rebuilds on the truth. That takes a trained eye. "Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong" (Hebrews 5:14). Bank tellers learn to spot fake bills by handling real ones every day. The more you handle the real thing, the faster the fake gives itself away.

PARABLE 9

Discernment Drill

The Counterfeit Handbag

1. **Observe.** What gets counterfeited, and what never does? What did Jesus do with the Temple when He found it full of money changers?

2. **Examine.** Two responses to the fakes appear in this parable: one throws everything out, the other tests and keeps. What does each one do to the house?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** After someone gets burned by a false prophet, what would “almost right” sound like?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a gift of God you’ve kept at arm’s length because of a bad experience?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

The Counterfeit Handbag

Season 4: Reformation · Restoring the House

The deciding question: Is something in God’s house being corrected and rebuilt on His Word?

Yes. A church that has thrown out the gifts because of the fakes is corrected by 1 Thessalonians 5, and the house is cleansed, not abandoned.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: rebuilding your life and church on His Word.** Paul’s command to test everything and hold on to what is good is the measuring line. Jesus cleansing the Temple is the picture: the fakes go, the house stays.
- **The sign: God is restoring something He designed that has been lost.** The gifts of the Spirit were God’s idea. A tradition of “we don’t do that here” lost them. Reformation brings back what He designed.
- **The counterfeit: deconstruction without reconstruction.** “If there are fakes, maybe it was all fake” tears down and builds nothing back. That is this season’s counterfeit exactly.

Almost right: avoiding the gifts because of the counterfeits.

Right: knowing the real so well the fake can’t fool you.

Why not Revival?

This parable is about prophecy, healing and the gifts of the Spirit, so Revival is a fair guess. But Revival is decided by a fresh hunger for God’s presence, and nobody in this story is hungry yet. The question here is what to do with a house full of fakes. Revival is the fire; reformation builds the fireplace. When the story tests, sorts and rebuilds on the Word, it’s Reformation.

Put it into practice

Name one gift of God you have kept at arm’s length because of a bad experience. This week, open your Bible to what it says about that gift, and ask God to train your eye to know the real.

PARABLE 10

Jesus Revolution

Wash Their Feet

Jesus Revolution (2023) tells the true story of how the Jesus Movement began in Southern California. In 1968, Chuck Smith, played by Kelsey Grammer, pastors a small church in Costa Mesa. It is faithful, respectable and slowly dying. His congregation is mostly his own age, and he doesn't understand the long-haired, drug-soaked young people filling the beaches. He shows his church a magazine cover asking, "Is God Dead?"

Then his daughter gives a ride to a hitchhiker named Lonnie Frisbee, played by Jonathan Roumie: a barefoot hippie who tells everyone he meets about Jesus. Chuck is suspicious. But Lonnie brings his friends, and Chuck hears them sing and pray, and something in him breaks open. He opens his home and then his church. Young people who had searched for God in drugs and music start finding Him. One of them is a high schooler named Greg Laurie, played by Joel Courtney, who has watched drugs nearly destroy the people around him. He comes to Christ and is baptized.

Not everyone is happy. One of the church's leaders complains that the barefoot hippies are ruining the new carpet. The next Sunday, Chuck answers by kneeling and washing the young people's feet as they come in.

Soon the church is too small. They meet under a tent. Hundreds at a time are baptized in the ocean at Pirates Cove. In 1971, *Time* magazine puts “The Jesus Revolution” on its cover. As the crowds and cameras grow, tension grows too, and Lonnie and Chuck part ways for a season. The film’s closing notes say the two men later reconciled. Greg Laurie went on to pastor Harvest Christian Fellowship and preach to millions.

As a parable, this is what it looks like when God shows up and people get hungry. Nobody in this story planned a revival. A dying church and a lost generation both came to the end of themselves, and God met them. “As they listen, their secret thoughts will be exposed, and they will fall to their knees and worship God, declaring, ‘God is truly here among you’” (1 Corinthians 14:25).

But notice what it cost. Chuck had to lay down his comfort, his preferences and some of his reputation. The carpet was the test. Many churches pray for revival and then complain about the carpet. Revival always costs something, and it usually comes in through the door we were guarding. Jesus took a towel and washed the feet of His disciples, and then said, “And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other’s feet” (John 13:14).

And notice the danger. When a move of God gets famous, the cameras come, and it is easy to start serving the crowd instead of the Presence. Revival isn’t when you cry; revival is when you change. The real fruit of the Jesus Movement wasn’t a magazine cover. It was young people like Greg whose lives were turned

around and who spent the rest of their lives pointing others to Jesus.

“I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy” (Acts 2:17). He is still pouring. The question is whether we’ll get hungry enough to open the door, and humble enough to wash some feet.

NOTES

PARABLE 10

Discernment Drill

Jesus Revolution

1. **Observe.** What was Chuck's church like before Lonnie arrived? What did young people like Greg go looking for, and what did they find?

2. **Examine.** What did Chuck have to give up? What happened when he knelt with a basin of water instead of defending the carpet?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Once *Time* magazine and the cameras arrive, what would "almost right" look like for a church in the middle of this?

4. **Look at your own life.** How hungry for God are you right now? What "carpet" are you protecting that might be keeping Him, or someone, out?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Jesus Revolution

Season 3: Revival · The Cost of Discipleship

The deciding question: Is God's presence awakening the person to their true identity in Him and a hunger for more of Him?

Yes. A dying church and a searching generation meet the presence of God, and the hunger costs Chuck his comfort.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: filling you with the Person of the Holy Spirit.** Nobody engineered this. Young people who had looked for God in drugs found Him and changed. "God is truly here among you."
- **The sign: a call to lay down a good thing to follow Him wholeheartedly.** Chuck's respectable church and his new carpet weren't sins. He laid them down, knelt and washed feet.
- **The counterfeit: hype and noise.** Magazine covers and cameras can be mistaken for revival. The real fruit was changed lives, like Greg's.

Almost right: Lord, send revival, but keep it off the carpet.

Right: Lord, send revival, and I'll wash the feet it brings.

Why not Reformation?

Chuck changes how his church does things, so Reformation is a fair guess. But the changes came because God showed up and people got hungry, not from a rediscovered blueprint. Revival is the fire; reformation builds the fireplace. This story is the fire.

Put it into practice

This week, ask God to make you hungry for His presence, not just His help. Then do one humble, practical thing for someone your church might find inconvenient.

Lean on Me

Rebuilding the House

Lean on Me (1989) is based on the true story of Joe Clark, played by Morgan Freeman. It is 1987, and Eastside High School in Paterson, New Jersey, is falling apart. Drug dealers walk the halls. Graffiti covers the walls. Teachers are afraid of their own students. The state has given the school an ultimatum: unless three out of four students pass the state's basic skills test, the state will take the school over.

The district hires Clark, a former teacher at the school, as principal. On his first day he calls the students who have been dealing drugs and terrorizing the halls onto the stage and expels about 300 of them. He paints over the graffiti. He walks the halls with a bullhorn and a baseball bat. He makes every student learn the school song and sing it on demand. People start calling him "Crazy Joe."

But tearing things out isn't enough, and the film shows that too. One of the expelled boys, Thomas Sams, a freshman caught smoking crack, comes back and begs for one more chance. Clark gives it to him. Assistant principal Joan Levias confronts Clark: cleaning up the halls won't pass a test. So he starts tutoring programs and Saturday reading classes that parents can attend too. And in his zeal, Clark goes too far. To keep the expelled dealers out, he chains the school doors shut, and during the week of the

test he is arrested for breaking the fire code. The students pour into the Board of Education meeting and demand that he be released. Then the results come in. More than three out of four passed. The school is saved.

The film is a dramatization, and Clark's methods aren't a model to copy. But as a parable, *Eastside* is a picture of a house that has lost its design. Nobody planned for it to become what it was. It drifted, one compromise at a time, until the people inside were afraid in the place that was supposed to form them. Some churches and homes look like that. What was built to raise sons and daughters has become a place where the loudest and most dangerous voices set the rules.

God's answer to a house like that has always been the same: tear out what doesn't belong, and rebuild on what He said. When Nehemiah came back to Jerusalem, the walls lay in ruins. He rebuilt them, and then the people gathered while Ezra read the Book of the Law aloud from morning until noon (Nehemiah 8:3). Walls first, then the Word, so the walls would mean something.

Notice the two dangers in Clark's story. The first is tearing down and never building. Expelling 300 students cleared the halls, but it didn't teach anyone to read. Levias was right. The second is zeal without mercy, chaining the doors to keep out the bad and trapping everyone inside. Reformation that forgets mercy only produces a new kind of Pharisee. A critical spirit can masquerade as discernment.

But look at Thomas Sams. The same man who expelled him gave him a second chance. That is what a reformed house looks like: high standards and an open door for the one who comes back. “Unless the LORD builds a house, the work of the builders is wasted” (Psalm 127:1).

NOTES

PARABLE 11

Discernment Drill

Lean on Me

1. **Observe.** What had Eastside High become before Clark arrived? List the things he tore out, and the things he built.

2. **Examine.** What did Joan Levias tell Clark, and what did he do about it? What does the story of Thomas Sams show about the kind of house Clark was trying to build?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Chaining the doors kept the dealers out. What would “almost right” sound like in Clark’s head that morning?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a place God gave you to build, a home, a ministry, a team, that has drifted from what it was meant to be?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

Lean on Me

Season 4: Reformation · Restoring the House

The deciding question: Is something in God's house being corrected and rebuilt on His Word?

Yes. A house built to form the next generation has drifted into chaos. What doesn't belong is torn out, and what was lost is rebuilt.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: rebuilding your life and church on His Word.** Like Nehemiah's walls and Ezra's reading of the Law, the story moves from ruin to rebuilding, and the rebuilding has a standard.
- **The sign: God is restoring something He designed that has been lost.** A school is designed to teach. Eastside had stopped. The tutoring, the Saturday classes and the test scores show the design coming back.
- **The counterfeit: deconstruction without reconstruction, and reformation without mercy.** Expelling 300 students taught no one, and chaining the doors was zeal past wisdom. Levias and Thomas Sams pull Clark back from both.

Almost right: Clear out everything that's wrong.

Right: Clear out what doesn't belong, build on what's true, and leave the door open.

Why not Revolution?

Clark walks into a hostile place and is even arrested, so Revolution is a fair guess. But this story is about the house itself: what had crept in, what was torn out and what was rebuilt. When the story turns on restoring a house to its design, it's Reformation.

Put it into practice

Pick one place God has given you to build, your home, your small group or your team. This week, name one thing that has crept in and doesn't belong, and one thing from God's design that needs to be built back. Start with the second.

PARABLE 12

Ghostbusters

Calling the Exterminator

In *Ghostbusters* (1984), three scientists lose their university jobs and open a ghost-removal business in an old New York firehouse. When something haunts a hotel ballroom or a cellist's apartment, people call them. They show up in jumpsuits with proton packs, zap the ghost, trap it in a box and send a bill. The whole city learns to live in fear and keep the number handy.

The film plays the spirit world for laughs and gets it wrong. But as a parable, the Ghostbuster mentality describes a whole way of doing church. Darkness is treated like a pest problem. Something goes wrong, so we look for the specialist with the right gear. Our sermons and prophetic words fixate on what the enemy is doing and what is wrong with people. We spend more time talking about the devil than talking to the Father. Over time it becomes a culture, and nobody remembers that it was never in the blueprint. John Paul Jackson put it this way: "Fear is when you focus more on the enemy's power to harm you than in your heavenly Father's ability to protect you."

Even the disciples got excited about the wrong thing. They came back from ministry thrilled that demons obeyed them. Jesus corrected them on the spot: "Don't rejoice because evil spirits obey you; rejoice because your names are registered in heaven" (Luke 10:20). Identity comes before authority.

An exterminator can clear a house, but he doesn't live there. Jesus warned that an evil spirit can return to a house that is swept clean and left empty (Matthew 12:43–45). What keeps a house is a family that lives in it. “You have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children” (Romans 8:15). Mature sons don’t check every room for ghosts. They know whose house it is.

So the answer isn’t to stop taking the enemy seriously. It’s to rebuild the house the way God designed it: sons and daughters who know their Father, who speak life over people (Ephesians 4:29), and who “resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). Stop waiting for someone with a proton pack. Grow up in the Father’s love.

PARABLE 12

Discernment Drill

Ghostbusters

1. **Observe.** How does the city in *Ghostbusters* handle darkness?
According to the parable, what do sermons and prophetic words in a “Ghostbuster church” focus on?

2. **Examine.** What did Jesus correct in His disciples in Luke 10:20?
According to Matthew 12, what keeps a house from being taken back?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Someone in this culture wakes up and realizes it’s all been about the devil. What would “almost right” look like if they overcorrect?

4. **Look at your own life.** In the last month, have you spent more time talking about the enemy or talking to the Father?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Ghostbusters

Season 4: Reformation · Restoring the House

The deciding question: Is something in God's house being corrected and rebuilt on His Word?

Yes. A church culture built on fear of the enemy is measured against Luke 10:20 and Romans 8:15, and rebuilt as a house where sons live with their Father.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: rebuilding your life and church on His Word.** Jesus corrects His disciples' focus, and Scripture redraws the blueprint: identity before authority, sons in the house instead of specialists on call.
- **The sign: Scripture exposing traditions that have replaced truth.** Calling the specialist, preaching about the devil, living in fear: none of it was in the design. It became a habit, and the Word exposes it.
- **The counterfeit: deconstruction without reconstruction.** Matthew 12 is the warning. A house swept clean and left empty gets taken back. Tearing out the fear-culture is only half the work. The house has to be filled with a family.

Almost right: I know who to call.

Right: I know whose I am.

Why not Repentance?

This parable leans hard on sonship and adoption, so Repentance is an honest guess. But it isn't addressed to one orphan coming home. It is addressed to a church whose whole way of doing things has drifted from the design. When the story corrects the culture of the house and rebuilds it on the Word, it's Reformation.

Put it into practice

This week, each time you catch yourself talking about the enemy, stop and spend that moment talking to the Father instead. Then speak one word of life over someone near you.

PARABLE 13

Arrival

Seeing the End, Saying Yes

In *Arrival* (2016), twelve alien ships appear over the earth. The Army brings in a linguist named Louise Banks to learn how to talk with the visitors hovering over Montana. Their written language looks like circles of ink, with no beginning and no end. As Louise learns it, something changes in her. She begins to experience time the way they do.

The memories of a daughter that run through the film turn out not to be memories at all. They are the future. Louise will have a girl named Hannah, and she will lose her to an illness while Hannah is still young.

Meanwhile, the world is on the edge of war. China's General Shang is ready to attack the ships, and other nations are lining up behind him. In a glimpse of the future, Louise sees herself at a gathering where Shang thanks her, gives her his private number, and tells her the last words his wife spoke before she died. Back in the present, Louise calls him and repeats those words. He stands down. A future she has already seen gives her what she needs to obey in the present.

At the end of the film, knowing exactly how her daughter's story will end, Louise chooses it anyway.

Arrival isn't a Christian film, and its picture of time is science fiction. But as a parable, it gives us a glimpse of something true. God sees the end from the beginning. "You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed" (Psalm 139:16).

God reverse engineered your life. He started with the finished product and ordered the steps backward from there. The gifts in you, the story behind you, even the tense place you're standing right now, none of it is random. Louise was the one person in the room who could read that language, in the very moment the world needed it read. Mordecai said it to Esther, a young woman placed in a hostile palace at the edge of a slaughter: "Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14). Esther's answer cost her everything she had to risk: "If I must die, I must die" (Esther 4:16).

It's easy to live as if we are making it up as we go. We hold back our yes until we can see how it all turns out. Louise lived the present in the light of a future she had already seen. We are called to live the same way, by faith. "So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

Jesus walked this road first. He knew how the week would end before He rode into Jerusalem. "Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame" (Hebrews 12:2).

Knowing the end didn't make the cross painless. It made the cross worth it.

You won't see your future the way Louise saw hers. You don't need to. The One who wrote every day in His book already has. He placed you where you are on purpose.

Eternity is calling you to fulfill your purpose in your generation.

Faith doesn't need to see the end; it trusts the One who already has. So say yes in the middle of the story.

NOTES

PARABLE 13

Discernment Drill

Arrival

1. **Observe.** Why was Louise the one person in the room who mattered when the world was on the edge of war? What did she know when she made her last choice?

2. **Examine.** How did a future Louise had seen change what she did in the present? What does Esther's story add?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** What would "almost right" sound like in someone who won't say yes to God until they can see how it turns out?

4. **Look at your own life.** Where has God placed you, with what you carry, in a place that feels tense or costly?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

Arrival

Season 6: Revolution · Driven by Eternity

The deciding question: Is the person being sent into a hard place to represent the Kingdom, at real cost?

Yes. Louise is placed in the one room where her gift can stop a war, and she says yes to a future she knows will cost her dearly. Esther's story is the same shape.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: sending you into your sphere to represent His Kingdom.** Louise's whole life prepared her for one tense room. God reverse engineered her steps to put her gift where the world needed it.
- **The sign: eternity is reordering how you spend your life.** A future she has already seen drives what she does today, and the choice she makes at the end. That is a life driven by eternity.
- **The counterfeit: a performance instead of a calling.** Louise doesn't use her gift to be seen. She makes a quiet phone call and chooses a costly life no one will applaud. A performer waits to know the payoff. A calling says yes first.

Almost right: If I knew how it ended, I would say yes.

Right: Because God knows how it ends, I can say yes now.

Why not Refinement?

Louise chooses a life with real pain in it, so Refinement is an understandable guess. But Refinement is decided by pressure forming character, and nothing here is training Louise through hardship. The story is about where she is placed, what she carries, and what she does there. When eternity is sending you, not pressing you, it's Revolution.

Put it into practice

Write down the gifts and the place God has given you right now. Ask Him what assignment you might be standing in, and take one step toward it this week.

The Greatest Showman

The Family Outside the Door

In *The Greatest Showman* (2017), Hugh Jackman plays P. T. Barnum, the son of a poor tailor who marries a rich man's daughter, Charity, and promises her a life bigger than anything she has known. After he loses his job, he opens a museum of oddities in New York. When crowds don't come, he gathers people the world had hidden away: a bearded lady, a tiny man the world called General Tom Thumb, trapeze artists and others who had spent their lives being stared at. Together they become a show, and then a family. The crowds pour in.

But success makes Barnum hungry for a different kind of applause. He wants the respect of the wealthy and the cultured. So he takes on the famous Swedish singer Jenny Lind and goes on tour with her, chasing the upper class. He leaves his circus family to carry on without him. His wife sits at home alone. On tour, Jenny falls for him. When he turns her down, she kisses him on stage in front of the cameras.

It all comes apart at once. The scandal ends the tour. Protesters fight with his performers, and the circus burns. The bank takes his mansion. Charity takes their daughters to her parents' house. Barnum ends up alone in a bar.

Then the people he had left behind walk in. They tell him they are still a family. Barnum rebuilds, this time in a simple tent. He hands

the role of ringmaster to his partner so he can go home, and the film ends with him leaving the show early to watch his little girls dance.

As a parable, notice when Barnum's trouble starts. Not when he was poor. Not when the crowds stayed away. It starts after the breakthrough, when the money, the mansion and the applause have arrived. His first success came from honoring people others had rejected. Paul wrote that "the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care" (1 Corinthians 12:23). His fall came when he started treating those same people as an embarrassment, and chased the approval of the crowd that had looked down on them.

King Nebuchadnezzar stood on his palace roof and said, "Look at this great city of Babylon! By my own mighty power, I have built this beautiful city as my royal residence to display my majestic splendor" (Daniel 4:30). Success had offered him the credit, and he took it. He lost it all. And when he finally lifted his eyes to heaven, his sanity and his kingdom were restored (Daniel 4:34–36).

It can happen to any of us. A ministry starts out gathering the outcasts and ends up chasing the spotlight. The work grows, influence grows, and the very people who built it are left waiting at the door. The test was never whether God could make the show a success. The test was whether success would change the showman.

The good news is that the family was still there when Barnum came home. The tent was smaller, but it was full. Grace had left

the door open. Keep the people who were there before the spotlight closer than the spotlight itself.

NOTES

PARABLE 14

Discernment Drill

The Greatest Showman

1. **Observe.** What did Barnum have before the tour, and who was with him when he built it? What did he chase once the crowds came?

2. **Examine.** At what point in the story does Barnum start to change? What does Nebuchadnezzar's rooftop speech have in common with Barnum's tour?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** With the crowds pouring in, what would "almost right" sound like in Barnum's head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Who stood with you before any success came? Are they closer to you now, or further away?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

The Greatest Showman

Season 8: Reward · Surviving the Anointing

The deciding question: Is the test coming from blessing, success or power that has already arrived?

Yes. Barnum's trouble begins after the crowds, the money and the fame arrive. Success is the test, and at first he fails it.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: testing your character with blessing.** The show's success revealed what was in Barnum: a hunger for approval that left his family outside. "A person is tested by being praised" (Proverbs 27:21).
- **The sign: success is offering you the credit.** Barnum chased the elite. Nebuchadnezzar said, "By my own mighty power." Both took the credit success offered them.
- **The counterfeit: treating blessing as proof of approval.** The bigger the crowds got, the surer Barnum was that he was right. Sometimes success is not the reward; sometimes success is the test.

Almost right: The bigger the crowd, the more God must be in it.

Right: The people God gave me matter more than the spotlight He allowed.

Why not Recalculate?

Barnum loses everything and rebuilds a better way, so Recalculate is a fair guess. But Recalculate is decided by a wrong road chosen out of fear or comfort. Barnum's road went wrong because of what success did to his heart. When the turning point comes after the blessing arrives, it's Reward.

Put it into practice

Think of someone who stood with you before any success came. This week, reach out and thank them, and ask how you can stand with them.

PARABLE 15

O

One Friend Away

O (2001) moves Shakespeare's *Othello* to an American prep school. Odin James, played by Mekhi Phifer, is the star of the basketball team. He has a future, a scholarship path and a girlfriend he loves, Desi, the dean's daughter. His teammate Hugo, played by Josh Hartnett, calls himself Odin's friend.

But Hugo is the coach's son, and after a big win his father gives the team's MVP award to Odin instead of him. Something in Hugo breaks. He has spent his life hungry for his father's approval, and now he watches it go to someone else. Envy settles in, and Hugo quietly sets out to destroy Odin.

He never attacks Odin directly. He works as a friend. He gets a teammate, Michael, suspended and then nudges him toward Desi for help. He drops hints to Odin that Michael and Desi are spending time together. He has a scarf Odin gave Desi stolen and planted with Michael. Every lie comes wrapped in concern. Odin doubts it at first. Then he believes it. Under the pressure he starts using drugs, and jealousy takes over his mind.

It ends in horror. Odin kills Desi, the girl who never betrayed him. Hugo kills two people to cover his tracks. When Odin finally sees how he was played, it's too late. He tells the police what happened and takes his own life. As Hugo is taken away, he's still talking about finally getting his moment in the spotlight.

As a parable, *O* tells the truth about how many lives are destroyed. Not by an enemy at the gate, but by a voice inside the circle. Odin had everything going for him, and he was one friend away from his destiny or one friend away from his destruction. He chose the wrong voice, and he let it drive.

Rehoboam made the same choice. When the people asked him to lighten their load, he asked the older men who had counseled his father, and they told him to serve the people. “But Rehoboam rejected the advice of the older men and instead asked the opinion of the young men who had grown up with him and were now his advisers” (1 Kings 12:8). He took his friends’ advice, and in one day ten tribes walked away from the house of David. “Walk with the wise and become wise; associate with fools and get in trouble” (Proverbs 13:20). “Bad company corrupts good character” (1 Corinthians 15:33).

And notice what drove Hugo. It’s the oldest seed in the Bible. When God accepted Abel’s offering and not Cain’s, God warned him: “Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master” (Genesis 4:7). Cain didn’t, and he killed his brother in a field. Envy put Jesus on the cross too: Pilate “realized by now that the leading priests had arrested Jesus out of envy” (Mark 15:10). An orphan heart that can’t stand to see another son blessed will tear down what it can’t have.

You may not have a Hugo, but every one of us has voices in our ear. Some of them are leading you toward your destiny. Some are walking you toward the edge, one “concerned” whisper at a time.

It isn't too late to change who's driving. Check the voices. Turn around while there's still road.

NOTES

PARABLE 15

Discernment Drill

O

1. **Observe.** What did Odin have going for him at the start? What happened to Hugo that set everything in motion?

2. **Examine.** How did Hugo get Odin to believe the lie? Whose voice did Odin trust, and whose did he stop trusting? What does Rehoboam's choice have in common with Odin's?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Hugo never sounded like an enemy. What did his "almost right" sound like?

4. **Look at your own life.** Whose voice has the most influence on your decisions right now? Is it leading you toward your destiny or away from it?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

PARABLE 15 · DEBRIEF

O

Season 5: Recalculate · Why Revival Tarries

The deciding question: Is God correcting a direction chosen through self-reliance or missing what He is saying?

Yes, and that is the warning. Odin let the wrong friend take the wheel and followed that voice off a cliff. The film never turns around. The parable is God's call for us to turn while there's still road.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: rerouting you when your plan overrules His.** Odin had a future in front of him. Rehoboam had a kingdom. Both followed the wrong counsel. God's heart is to reroute us before the wrong voice takes us all the way to the end of the road.
- **The sign: you are trusting a voice other than God's.** Hugo's whispers drowned out the truth Desi told Odin to his face. "Fear, comfort or a person has quietly taken the wheel," and this time it was a friend.
- **The counterfeit: mislabeling the wilderness.** Odin called Hugo's lies loyalty and Desi's faithfulness betrayal. Recalculate's counterfeit gets the labels backward: the enemy's voice sounds like a friend, and the truth sounds like an attack.

Almost right: He's my friend. He's just looking out for me.

Right: I'll test every voice, even the ones closest to me.

Why not Repentance?

Envy and jealousy are sins of the heart, and Hugo's orphan hunger for his father's approval is a Repentance picture. But the parable follows Odin, and his story turns on whose voice he trusted and where it drove him. We are one friend away from our destiny or our destruction. When the story is about the road and the voice steering it, it's Recalculate.

Put it into practice

List the three voices with the most influence on your decisions. This week, ask God about each one: is this voice leading me toward You or away from You? Then make one change.

Avengers: Endgame

The Sacrifice Play

Avengers: Endgame (2019) picks up five years after Thanos wiped out half of all life with a snap of his fingers. Every path to undoing it runs through sacrifice.

On the planet Vormir, Natasha Romanoff and Clint Barton learn that the Soul Stone can only be gained by giving up someone you love. Each of them fights to be the one who dies. Natasha falls.

Tony Stark has the most to lose. Years earlier, Steve Rogers told him he wasn't the kind of man to make the sacrifice play. Now Tony has finally found peace: a cabin by a lake, his wife Pepper and their little girl, Morgan. He could stay. Instead he joins the fight, walks onto a battlefield against an enemy who has already won once, and at the end he takes the stones onto his own hand, knowing it will kill him. As he snaps, he says only, "I am Iron Man."

As a parable, *Endgame* asks the question every believer must answer: will you go where the Kingdom sends you, even when it costs you everything? Tony had a cabin. He didn't need to go back to the battlefield. But the world was lost, and he was one of the few who could do something about it. The remnant God is raising up will be marked by that kind of surrender: people who leave the cabin for the front line.

Jesus defined it: “There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). Thanos boasted that he was inevitable. Jesus said, “No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily” (John 10:18). The saints overcame “by the blood of the Lamb and by their testimony. And they did not love their lives so much that they were afraid to die” (Revelation 12:11).

Most of us won’t die in a final battle. We’ll be sent into ordinary hostile places, an office, a school, a family that doesn’t share our faith, and asked to lay our lives down there a little at a time: our comfort, our plans, our right to be first. “If you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it” (Mark 8:35).

The cross has already won the endgame. Our part is to follow the Lamb onto the field.

PARABLE 16

Discernment Drill

Avengers: Endgame

1. **Observe.** What did Tony have at the lake? What did Steve once say about him, and what did Tony do at the end?

2. **Examine.** Why did Tony go back when he didn't have to? Who was he fighting for?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Sitting on the dock at the cabin, what would “almost right” sound like in Tony’s head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Where is God sending you that will cost you comfort? What “cabin” would you rather stay in?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Avengers: Endgame

Season 6: Revolution · Driven by Eternity

The deciding question: Is the person being sent into a hard place to represent the Kingdom, at real cost?

Yes. Tony leaves the cabin for a battlefield, for the sake of a world that isn't his to save alone, and it costs him his life.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: sending you into your sphere to represent His Kingdom.** Tony could have stayed at the lake. He went where he was needed, onto ground the enemy had already won.
- **The sign: you are being sent into a place where faith is costly.** The fight costs Natasha her life, then Tony his. The cost is not a side detail. It is the story.
- **The counterfeit: a performance instead of a calling.** Steve once said Tony wasn't the kind of man to make the sacrifice play. A performer protects himself and his image. A calling gives itself away, quietly: "I am Iron Man."

Almost right: I'll give God what I can spare.

Right: I'll go where He sends me and lay down my life.

Why not Release?

Tony lets go of his family and his peace, so Release is an understandable guess. But Release is decided by something good that has finished its season, and Tony's family hadn't finished anything. He laid down his life for others in the middle of the fight. When the story turns on being sent into the battle at great cost, it's Revolution.

Put it into practice

Pick one place you have been avoiding because faith costs something there. This week, go, and lay down one comfort for someone in it on purpose.

Hacksaw Ridge

Just One More

Hacksaw Ridge (2016) tells the true story of Desmond Doss, a young man from the Virginia mountains and a devout Seventh-day Adventist. He grew up in a home scarred by his father's drinking and rage, a World War I veteran who never came all the way home. Desmond made a vow never to pick up a gun.

When World War II came, Desmond turned down a deferment and enlisted. He wanted to serve as a combat medic, to save lives while others took them. The Army didn't know what to do with him. In basic training, the men in his unit called him a coward. They threw boots at him while he knelt to pray beside his bunk. His officers tried to drive him out, and he was nearly court-martialed for refusing to carry a rifle. He wouldn't quit, and he wouldn't pick it up.

Then his unit was sent to Okinawa, to a jagged cliff the soldiers called Hacksaw Ridge. In the spring of 1945, the Americans reached the top and were driven back under heavy fire. The survivors scrambled down. Desmond stayed. For hours, alone on the ridge, he went from one wounded man to the next, dragged each one to the edge and lowered him down the cliff on a rope. The Army credits him with saving about 75 men that day. After each one, he reportedly prayed, "Dear God, let me get just one

more man.” In the film, he even stops to help a wounded enemy soldier.

Later in the campaign, a grenade tore into his leg, and a sniper’s bullet shattered his arm. In October 1945, President Harry Truman placed the Medal of Honor around his neck. The man they had called a coward was the only conscientious objector to receive it in World War II.

The film is brutally violent, because war is. But as a parable, Desmond is a picture of a believer sent into the most hostile place on earth, not to become like it, but to represent another Kingdom in the middle of it. He didn’t stay home where his convictions were safe. He went into the war. And he didn’t leave his convictions at home to fit in. He carried them up the cliff.

Daniel served Babylon for decades and never bowed. Desmond served the Army and never took up the rifle. Neither one ran from the assignment, and neither one let the assignment change who he was. “Don’t let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good” (Romans 12:21).

His prayer is the heart of it. Jesus told of a shepherd who will “leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it” (Luke 15:4). Desmond went back for the one, again and again, while bullets flew.

Many of us want to represent the Kingdom from a safe distance. But God sends His people into hostile ground: an office, a locker room, a family, a campus. The cost is real, and so is the

assignment. Pray Desmond's prayer where you are: Lord, let me get just one more.

NOTES

PARABLE 17

Discernment Drill

Hacksaw Ridge

1. **Observe.** What did Desmond refuse to do, and what did he refuse to stop doing? What did the men in his unit think of him at first?

2. **Examine.** Desmond could have avoided the war entirely. Why did he go? What did it cost him, and what did he carry onto the ridge?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Two “almost right” paths were open to Desmond before he ever reached Okinawa. What were they?

4. **Look at your own life.** Where has God placed you that is hostile to your faith? Are you hiding there, or blending in?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Hacksaw Ridge

Season 6: Revolution · Driven by Eternity

The deciding question: Is the person being sent into a hard place to represent the Kingdom, at real cost?

Yes. Desmond goes into the war, onto the most hostile ground imaginable, to save lives in the name of his God. It costs him his reputation, nearly his freedom, and his body.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: sending you into your sphere to represent His Kingdom.** Like Daniel in Babylon, Desmond didn't run from the assignment and didn't let it change him. The ridge was his mountain, and he represented another Kingdom on it.
- **The sign: you are being sent into a place where faith is costly.** Boots thrown while he prayed, a near court-martial, a grenade and a sniper's bullet. Faith cost him at every stage.
- **The counterfeit: a performance instead of a calling.** Desmond had nothing to perform for. He was mocked, not applauded. Alone on the ridge, with no one watching but God, he kept going back for one more. That is a calling.

Almost right: I'll keep my faith somewhere it's safe.

Right: I'll carry my faith into the hard place, and go back for one more.

Why not Refinement?

Desmond is harassed and pressured in training, so Refinement is a fair guess, and that pressure did strengthen him. But the story doesn't turn in the barracks. It turns on the ridge: where he has been sent and what he does there. When the story is about being sent into hostile ground for the sake of others, it's Revolution.

Put it into practice

Name the "ridge" God has placed you on, the place where faith costs you most. This week, pray Desmond's prayer there each day, and look for the one person you can help.

The Adjustment Bureau

Covenant over Career

In *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011), David Norris is a rising politician headed for the presidency. Then he meets Elise, a dancer, and everything in him comes alive. But a mysterious bureau of men in hats keeps pulling them apart, because their plan for David's life doesn't include her. One of them finally explains why: if David has her, he may stop needing to fill the hole inside him with votes, applause and dreams of power. She would be enough.

David has to choose between the career that was scripted for him and the covenant his heart was made for. He chooses her, and he lays down the ambition to keep the promise.

The film gets God wrong. The Lord isn't a bureau of agents scheming to keep you from love. But as a parable, it exposes something real. Ambition isn't evil, and a career can be a calling. But there is a season when the ladder has done what it was for, and something better has come. Many of us keep climbing anyway, using achievement to fill a void only covenant was meant to fill: covenant with God first, then with the people He gives us. The résumé grows while the marriage starves. The platform rises while the family waits in the car.

“What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?” (Mark 8:36). Love “does not demand its own way” (1 Corinthians 13:5). Husbands are told to love their wives “just as

Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her” (Ephesians 5:25). Jesus didn’t climb to greatness. He came down for His bride.

Sometimes love means letting go of the ladder so you can hold on to the covenant. Not every ending is a failure. Applause can’t love you back. Your family can.

PARABLE 18

Discernment Drill

The Adjustment Bureau

1. **Observe.** What was David chasing before he met Elise? According to the bureau, what would happen to that hunger if he had her?

2. **Examine.** What was the career really doing for David? What does he give up at the end, and does anyone force him to?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Working late again while his family waits, what would “almost right” sound like in a man like David?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a good goal you’re still climbing toward that keeps winning over the people God gave you?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

The Adjustment Bureau

Season 7: Release · Divine Pruning

The deciding question: Is the person being asked to let go of something good that has finished its season?

Yes. The career is good, but its season as the thing filling David's heart is over. He opens his hand on purpose to keep the covenant.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: cutting away what has finished its season.** Votes and applause had been filling a hole only covenant could fill. When covenant came, the climb had done its work, and David let it go.
- **The sign: God is asking for something good, not something sinful.** A path to the presidency isn't sin. Release so often asks us to lay down a good thing, not a bad one.
- **The counterfeit: holding on to what has finished.** The bureau's whole plan depends on David staying hungry for the ladder. Holding on would have cost him the very love that made the ladder unnecessary.

Almost right: I'm doing it all for them.

Right: I'm giving myself to them.

Why not Reward?

Votes, applause and dreams of power sound like the test of blessing, so Reward is an understandable pick. But Reward is decided by blessing that has already arrived. David is still on the climb, and the story turns on what he chooses to lay down. When the question is whether you'll open your hand, it's Release.

Put it into practice

This week, name one goal that keeps winning over your family. Lay it before the Father, then give that time back to the people waiting in the car.

Wreck-It Ralph

Game-Jumping for a Medal

In Disney's *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), Ralph is the bad guy in an old arcade game called *Fix-It Felix, Jr.* For thirty years, every time someone drops in a quarter, Ralph wrecks the apartment building and Felix fixes it, and the residents throw Ralph off the roof into the mud. When the game's characters throw a thirtieth-anniversary party, Ralph isn't invited. He sits in a support group for video game villains, but he's tired of being the bad guy. So he makes a plan: if he can win a medal, they'll finally respect him.

Ralph leaves his own game, which a character is never supposed to do, and sneaks into a violent shooter called *Hero's Duty*, where they hand out medals. He grabs one, but he also accidentally brings along a Cy-Bug, a monster that spreads like a virus. He crash-lands in a candy racing game called *Sugar Rush*. Meanwhile, back home, his game stops working without its bad guy. The arcade owner hangs an "Out of Order" sign on it. If Ralph doesn't come back, the game will be unplugged, and everyone in it will be homeless.

In *Sugar Rush*, Ralph meets Vanellope von Schweetz, a glitching little girl the other racers reject. She steals his medal, and he ends up building her a kart and teaching her to drive. But King Candy, the game's ruler, takes Ralph aside. He gives Ralph his medal back and tells him that if Vanellope races, her glitch will get the game

unplugged and she'll die. Ralph believes him, and with his own hands he smashes the kart he built for her.

Back in his game, Ralph sees Vanellope's picture on the side of the *Sugar Rush* cabinet and realizes King Candy lied. He goes back. He frees her, and when the Cy-Bugs swarm the game, he risks his own life to save everyone. In the end, Vanellope wins her race, and the game resets to reveal that she was its rightful princess all along. Ralph goes home to his own game, back to wrecking and being thrown in the mud, and for the first time he's content. Now he knows his place matters, and someone loves him as he is.

As a parable, Ralph's problem wasn't that he wanted to matter. It was his plan for how. He decided a medal would make him somebody, and he left his assignment to go get it. His plan put everyone in danger: his own game went dark, and he carried a virus into someone else's world. Then a lying voice took the wheel, and he wrecked the very thing he'd built.

Moses did something like that. At forty, he decided to rescue Israel his own way and killed an Egyptian. "Moses assumed his fellow Israelites would realize that God had sent him to rescue them, but they didn't" (Acts 7:25). He fled to Midian, and it was forty years before God met him at a burning bush and sent him back, this time God's way. "There is a path before each person that seems right, but it ends in death" (Proverbs 14:12).

Many of us are game-jumping, chasing a medal somewhere else because we're tired of the role God gave us. Meanwhile, the place we were assigned sits dark with a sign on it. The good news is that

God turns people around. Ralph went home, and so can you. The place God gave you was never too small. It was yours.

NOTES

PARABLE 19

Discernment Drill

Wreck-It Ralph

1. **Observe.** Why did Ralph leave his game, and what was he after? What happened to his own game, and to *Sugar Rush*, while he was gone?

2. **Examine.** Whose voice convinced Ralph to wreck Vanellope's kart? What turned him around, and where did he end up?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Holding the medal in *Hero's Duty*, what would "almost right" sound like in Ralph's head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a "medal" you've been chasing outside the place God assigned you? Who back home is paying for it?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Wreck-It Ralph

Season 5: Recalculate • Why Revival Tarries

The deciding question: Is God correcting a direction chosen through self-reliance or missing what He is saying?

Yes. Ralph's plan to earn a medal takes him out of his own game and endangers two worlds. He's turned around, and he goes home.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: rerouting you when your plan overrules His.** Ralph's plan overruled his assignment. Like Moses at forty, he tried to become somebody his own way, and the road led to wreckage before it led home.
- **The sign: you are trusting a voice other than God's.** King Candy's lie got Ralph to smash the very kart he'd built. A voice other than the truth took the wheel.
- **The counterfeit: mislabeling the wilderness.** Ralph called his road a quest for respect. It was abandoning his post. The "Out of Order" sign on his own game told the truth.

Almost right: If I get the medal, I'll finally matter.

Right: I matter where God put me, and I'll go back to my post.

Why not Repentance?

Ralph learns he's loved as he is, and that sounds like Repentance, an orphan finding where he belongs. But this story is built around a road: leaving his game, the damage his plan caused, and the long way home. When the story turns on getting off the wrong road and back to your assignment, it's Recalculate.

Put it into practice

Name one way you've been chasing recognition outside your assignment. This week, give your best to one ordinary task in the place God put you, with no one watching.

PARABLE 20

Oliver!

A Name, Not a Price

In *Oliver!* (1968), Oliver runs away to London, starving and alone. The Artful Dodger finds him and takes him to Fagin's hideout, a den of boy pickpockets. Fagin gives him a bed, a meal, a place in the gang and a cheerful song about picking a pocket or two: food, protection, belonging and a role. The price is hidden. Theft becomes survival, and the boys trade their freedom and conscience for a false family. Behind Fagin stands Bill Sikes, who rules by fear and violence and forces Oliver into a robbery.

Then there is Mr. Brownlow. On Oliver's first outing with the gang, the boys pick Brownlow's pocket, and Oliver is the one caught and dragged into court. Brownlow could have let him go to prison. Instead, he takes the boy home. He feeds him, clothes him, puts him in a clean bed and treats him like a son. And in time, through a portrait and a locket, Brownlow discovers that this ragged boy is his own flesh and blood. The man Oliver was accused of robbing turns out to be family, and he gives Oliver what Fagin never could: a name and a home.

As a parable, *Oliver!* is a picture of what the Kingdom passes from one generation to the next. Every boy in that den was being raised by someone. Fagin and Sikes were raising boys too, but what they handed down was a wound, a price tag and fear. Brownlow handed

down a blessing. He saw a boy everyone else had written off as a thief, and he decided to be the one who raised him.

That is what God is looking for in every generation. Paul saw it in a young man named Timothy: “I remember your genuine faith, for you share the faith that first filled your grandmother Lois and your mother, Eunice” (2 Timothy 1:5). A grandmother passed faith to a mother, a mother passed it to a son, and Paul became a father to him in the faith. That is a blessing handed down three times.

And it is exactly what God did for us. “The Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost” (Luke 19:10). We were all Olivers: caught, guilty by association, raised by the wrong voices. The Father brought us home, washed us and gave us His name. “See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1).

Teachers give you a map for the wilderness. Fathers walk through it with you. Every one of us is raising someone, whether we mean to or not: a son, a daughter, a young believer, a coworker who watches how we handle Monday. Somewhere right now there is a boy in Fagin’s den. Be his Brownlow. Give him a name, a home and no price tag.

PARABLE 20

Discernment Drill

Oliver!

1. **Observe.** What did Fagin offer Oliver, and what was the hidden price? What did Brownlow do after Oliver was caught?

2. **Examine.** Compare what Fagin passed on to his boys with what Brownlow gave Oliver. What does 2 Timothy 1:5 add to the picture?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Fagin gave the boys food, shelter and belonging. Why was that “almost right”?

4. **Look at your own life.** Who was a Brownlow to you? Who is watching how you live right now?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Oliver!

Season 9: Repeat • Break the Cycle

The deciding question: Is God fathering you so you can give the next generation the care and discipleship you needed?

Yes. Brownlow takes in a boy the world wrote off and gives him a name and a home. The parable sends you out to do the same for the next boy.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: making you a father or mother to the next generation.** Brownlow raises Oliver as a son, and the parable's charge is to become a Brownlow to a boy still in the den.
- **The sign: God is fathering you where your father couldn't.** Oliver, fatherless and raised by the wrong voices, is finally fathered well. Lois to Eunice to Timothy shows the same blessing passed down in faith.
- **The counterfeit: repeating what was done to you because it's familiar.** Fagin's den was a counterfeit family: belonging with a price. Brownlow broke it by giving freely. Hurt people hurt people; healed people heal people.

Almost right: Someone is taking care of me.

Right: My Father is raising me, so I'll raise someone too.

Why not Repentance?

Oliver is an orphan who finds his true family, and that is the heart of Repentance. A reader who picks it has heard something real. But the story isn't about a sin or a lie Oliver turns from. It's about an older man giving a younger one the blessing of a name and a home, and the call to pass that on. When the story turns on a blessing handed down, it's Repeat.

Put it into practice

Name one younger person who is being raised by the wrong voices. This week, give them some of your time with no price attached.

Remember the Titans

One House

Remember the Titans (2000) is based on the true story of T. C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia. It is 1971, and the city's schools have just been combined. Black and white students who have never shared a classroom now share a hallway, a locker room and a football team. The town is tense and angry. The school board names Herman Boone, played by Denzel Washington, as head coach over Bill Yoast, the popular white coach who had earned the job. Yoast's white players threaten to quit. To keep them from losing their futures, Yoast swallows his pride and stays on as Boone's assistant.

At training camp at Gettysburg College, Boone forces Black and white players to room together, eat together and learn about one another. The two strongest leaders, Gerry Bertier, who is white, and Julius Campbell, who is Black, clash hard. Julius tells Gerry the team won't come together while its captain plays favorites with his friends. Gerry sees it's true. He confronts one of his own white teammates for refusing to block for a Black player, and Gerry and Julius become brothers. In the film, Boone takes the team on a run before dawn to the battlefield, where brothers once killed each other, and tells them that if they don't come together, they'll be destroyed too.

The team comes home united, but the town doesn't change overnight. Before a semifinal game, Yoast learns that officials have arranged for the Titans to lose so Boone will be fired. When the bad calls start, Yoast confronts the referee and threatens to expose it. The Titans win, and Yoast loses his own place in the coaches' Hall of Fame for standing with the man who took his job. By the end of the season, the team that began divided wins the state championship, and the town that was tearing itself apart fills the stands together.

The film dramatizes many details. But as a parable, the Titans are a picture of a house rebuilt the way it was designed. Division was the tradition, and everyone knew the rules: who sits where, who eats with whom, who blocks for whom. That tradition was older than anyone on the team, and it had to be torn down and replaced with something true.

The early church faced the same thing. When Peter came to Antioch, he ate with the Gentile believers, until some visitors arrived from Jerusalem. "Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people" (Galatians 2:12). Even Barnabas followed him. So Paul opposed Peter to his face, "When I saw that they were not following the truth of the gospel message" (Galatians 2:14). The gospel corrected a tradition, and the house was put back on its foundation.

God's design was never a divided house. "For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us" (Ephesians 2:14). "Together, we are his

house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself” (Ephesians 2:20).

Notice what kept it from being only a teardown. Boone was hard, and for a while too hard. Yoast brought the mercy that kept players from breaking. Reformation that forgets mercy only produces a new kind of Pharisee. It took both coaches, and both men laying down their pride, to build something that lasted. Many churches are still sitting at separate tables. The Word says there is one house. It’s time to build it.

NOTES

PARABLE 21

Discernment Drill

Remember the Titans

1. **Observe.** What was the town and the team like at the start? What did Boone make the players do at camp?

2. **Examine.** What did Julius tell Gerry, and what did Gerry do about it? What did standing with Boone cost Yoast? What did Paul correct in Peter, and why?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Boone was right about unity but harsh about everything. What would “almost right” look like for a leader who tears down division without mercy?

4. **Look at your own life.** Where do you still “sit at a separate table” in your church, your workplace or your family?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Remember the Titans

Season 4: Reformation · Restoring the House

The deciding question: Is something in God’s house being corrected and rebuilt on His Word?

Yes. A tradition of division is torn down, and a team, and in time a town, is rebuilt as one house. Paul’s rebuke of Peter shows the same correction in the church.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: rebuilding your life and church on His Word.** “Together, we are his house.” The Titans are rebuilt on a foundation stronger than the old rules, just as Paul called the church back to “the truth of the gospel message.”
- **The sign: Scripture exposing traditions that have replaced truth.** Separate tables were the tradition at T. C. Williams and in Antioch. In both places, the tradition had to go.
- **The counterfeit: reformation that forgets mercy.** Boone’s harshness alone could have broken the team. Yoast’s mercy, and his costly loyalty, kept the rebuilding from becoming a new kind of tyranny.

Almost right: We’ll tolerate each other to win.

Right: We’re one house, built on one foundation.

Why not Revolution?

Boone walks into a hostile town and pays a price, so Revolution is a fair guess. But the story doesn’t follow one man sent into enemy ground. It follows a divided house being torn down and rebuilt together. When the story turns on restoring God’s design for the house, it’s Reformation.

Put it into practice

This week, sit at a different “table”: invite someone from a different background in your church or workplace for a meal, and listen to their story.

PARABLE 22

"Apologize"

Sorry Without Change

OneRepublic's "Apologize" first appeared on the band's 2007 debut album, and a remix produced by Timbaland turned it into a worldwide hit. Over a haunting piano, the singer tells someone who hurt him that their apology has come too late. He held on and took the fall for them, and they kept letting him down. Now they want to say sorry, and the door is closing. The problem isn't the word "sorry." It's that nothing behind it ever changed.

As a parable, much of what we call turning back to God is really apology. We cry at the altar on Sunday and go back to the same thing on Monday. All sin separates us from God, but how hard our hearts become depends on the sin we choose to tolerate. Every "sorry" without change makes the next one easier to say and harder to mean. The Church can do this too, apologizing in public for the same patterns it keeps protecting in private.

Scripture draws a clear line between two kinds of sorrow. "For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death" (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Two men wept on the night Jesus was arrested. Judas "was filled with remorse" (Matthew 27:3), but remorse led him to despair, not to Jesus. Peter wept bitterly too, and his tears brought him back to

the shore where Jesus was waiting. The difference wasn't how sorry they were. It was which direction their sorrow took them. Remorse looks at what I did. Repentance turns me toward the Father.

Esau lost a blessing that tears could not buy back: "It was too late for repentance, even though he begged with bitter tears" (Hebrews 12:17).

Here is the good news the song never gets to. With God, the door is still open, and the word He uses is *today*. "Today when you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts" (Hebrews 3:15). Don't bring Him an apology. Bring Him your heart, and let Him change it. "Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God" (Matthew 3:8).

PARABLE 22

Discernment Drill

"Apologize"

1. **Observe.** Why does the singer say the apology is too late? What was missing behind the word “sorry”?

2. **Examine.** Judas and Peter both wept. What made the difference between them, according to 2 Corinthians 7:10?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** What would “almost right” sound like in someone leaving the altar on Sunday?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a “sorry” you keep saying to God without anything changing?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

"Apologize"

Season 2: Repentance • Orphans No More

The deciding question: Is the person turning from sin or a lie about themselves to agree with God's truth?

Yes. The problem is a sin we keep tolerating and a "sorry" with nothing behind it. The call is to turn from it and come back to the Father today.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: bringing you home as a son or daughter.** Peter's tears brought him back to Jesus, and Jesus was waiting. The door is still open, and the word is *today*.
- **The sign: a hidden secret keeps pulling you back into hiding.** Sunday tears, Monday relapse. The sin that keeps calling us back is a sign of this season.
- **The counterfeit: sorry without change.** The song names it in its title. Judas had remorse. Peter had repentance. Remorse looks at what I did. Repentance changes my mind and hands my past to God.

Almost right: I'm sorry.

Right: I'm turning, and He is changing me.

Why not Recalculate?

Crying at the altar on Sunday and going back on Monday sounds like circling the same mountain, a sign of Recalculate. But Recalculate is decided by a wrong road chosen by your plan, fear or comfort. This parable is about the gap between apology and change in the heart. Recalculate changes the route. Repentance changes the heart that chose it. Here it's Repentance.

Put it into practice

Pick the one "sorry" you keep repeating. This week, tell God and one trusted friend the concrete change you will make, and ask that friend to check on you.

PARABLE 23

NF, "Let You Down" and "Time"

Honest Lament

NF is a rapper from Michigan who has never pretended to be fine. "Let You Down," from his 2017 album *Perception*, became his biggest hit. He has said it grew out of his relationship with his father, who raised him. The song carries the weight of disappointing someone you love, feeling the distance, and not knowing how to fix it. Two years later, on *The Search*, he released "Time," written to his wife. In it he owns his part in their struggles, takes the blame, and asks for time to prove he can be the man she needs.

Neither song offers a forced smile or a quick resolution, and millions heard their own story in them.

As a parable, NF's music shows what it sounds like to stay in the fire without lying about the heat. The pain is real. The distance is real. Nothing gets fixed in three minutes. But he keeps talking, keeps owning his part, keeps asking for time. That is what a heart sounds like while it is being formed under pressure.

The Church has often gotten this wrong. We have taught people to hide their feelings so they will look like they have faith. But biblical feelings and biblical facts belong together. You can be honest about what hurts and still stand on what is true. Many believers need permission to have a process.

The Bible gives that permission. In Lamentations, Jeremiah pours out his grief without polishing it, and then turns: “Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease” (Lamentations 3:21–22). The psalmist argues with his own soul: “Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God!” (Psalm 42:11). Job lost almost everything and said hard, honest things to God for chapter after chapter. He never got an explanation. He got an encounter: “now I have seen you with my own eyes” (Job 42:5). Jesus Himself said in the garden, “My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38).

Lament is faith that refuses to stop talking to God. It doesn’t skip the crushing, and it doesn’t let go of Him in it. Bring Him the real thing. Then let His mercies, new every morning, have the last word.

PARABLE 23

Discernment Drill

NF, "Let You Down" and "Time"

1. **Observe.** What weight does "Let You Down" carry? What does NF ask for in "Time"?

2. **Examine.** What do Jeremiah, the psalmist and Job have in common with these songs? What do they do with their pain that the Church often tells people not to do?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** There are two "almost right" ways to handle pain in this parable. What are they?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a hurt you've been hiding from God because you thought faith meant looking fine?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

NF, "Let You Down" and "Time"

Season 1: Refinement · Divine Training

The deciding question: Is God using pressure to train the person's character, not to punish them or turn them around?

Yes. The pain isn't punishment, and it isn't a wrong road. It is a long, unresolved season, and the question is whether the heart stays honest with God and keeps growing in it.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: using pressure to train you, not punish you.** Nothing gets fixed quickly in these songs, and that is the point. Like Job, the one in the fire is being formed by it, and the reward is an encounter, not an explanation.
- **The sign: prayers seem to go unanswered and the promise looks far away.** Distance, disappointment, no resolution. That is the hidden, unfinished place where Refinement does its work.
- **The counterfeit: avoiding the truth, or lowering your theology to match your pain.** Pretending to be fine avoids the truth about the pain. Giving up on God lowers the truth about Him. Lament refuses both, and it won't settle for grape juice that skips the crushing.

Almost right: hiding the hurt so I look strong.

Right: bringing the hurt to God so He can form me in it.

Why not Repentance?

"Time" pulls toward Repentance, because NF owns his part and asks for a chance to change. But Repentance is decided by a sin or a lie that must be turned from, and these songs are mostly about staying honest while the pain does its work. When the call is to keep trusting God in the fire rather than turn from a sin, it's Refinement.

Put it into practice

This week, write one honest prayer that tells God exactly what hurts. Then end it with one thing you know is true about His faithful love.

PARABLE 24

Blindspot

The Soldier and the Daughter

Blindspot (2015–2020) opens in Times Square, where police find a travel bag that no one claims. Inside is a woman, alive, with no memory of who she is, her body covered in fresh tattoos. The FBI calls her Jane Doe. Her tattoos turn out to be clues to crimes, and Special Agent Kurt Weller’s team takes her in. Jane doesn’t know her own name, but she knows how to fight, and over time this team becomes the first real family she can remember. She and Weller eventually marry.

Slowly, the truth surfaces. Jane was born Alice Kruger in South Africa. Orphaned as a child, she was trained as a child soldier, then adopted, along with her brother Roman, by Ellen Briggs, a former general known as Shepherd. Shepherd raised them to be weapons for her own cause. Under her, Jane was someone else entirely: Remi, loyal, hard and dangerous. Remi volunteered to have her memories wiped with a drug called ZIP, and “Jane” was born on the other side of it. The soldier chose to forget who she was.

Then the past comes back for her. In the fourth season, the effects of ZIP drag the old personality to the surface. Remi returns and starts working against the very people who love Jane, even freeing Shepherd. Two identities fight over one life. After treatment, Jane recovers her memories and faces who she used to be. She doesn’t pretend Remi never existed. But she refuses to let Remi lead. She

stands with her family and turns on the false mother who made her a soldier.

As a parable, Remi and Jane are two ways of living. Remi is the orphan mindset: her identity comes from performance, usefulness and loyalty to power. Her core belief is “I must secure my place or I will be discarded.” Loyalty is traded for belonging, control masquerades as strength, and people are assets, threats or liabilities. Jane is what the spirit of adoption looks like: “I am secure; therefore I can act in truth.” Boundaries without abandonment. Authority without domination. Service without self-erasure. Daughterhood before duty.

Let me be clear: what was done to that little girl was not her fault. No child chooses to be made a soldier. But the orphan mindset it built in her was still a lie she had to turn from, and so is ours. An orphan works to receive love; a child works from a place of being loved.

Paul describes the turn: “throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy” (Ephesians 4:22–24). And he tells us who we are now: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, ‘Abba, Father.’ For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God’s children” (Romans 8:14–16).

Many of us know what it's like when the old self resurfaces, when the soldier we used to be tries to take the wheel back. Repentance doesn't erase the past. It hands the past to God and refuses to let it lead. And notice how the series ends, in one version of its finale: Jane and Weller foster child after child. The orphan becomes the one who gives orphans a home.

NOTES

PARABLE 24

Discernment Drill

Blindspot

1. **Observe.** Who raised Remi, and what did she raise her to be? What happened when Remi resurfaced in the fourth season?

2. **Examine.** Compare what Remi believed about her place in the world with what Jane came to believe. What made the difference?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** When the old personality returns, what would “almost right” sound like in Jane’s head?

4. **Look at your own life.** When the pressure is on, which one shows up in you, the soldier or the daughter?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Blindspot

Season 2: Repentance · Orphans No More

The deciding question: Is the person turning from sin or a lie about themselves to agree with God’s truth?

Yes. The orphan lie, “I must secure my place or I will be discarded,” lives inside Remi. Jane has to turn from it to live as a daughter who belongs.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: bringing you home as a son or daughter.** A child taken by a false mother and raised as a weapon finds a family, and finally chooses to belong to it. “You received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children.”
- **The sign: you are living like an orphan in the Father’s house.** Remi lived for usefulness and loyalty to power. Even surrounded by people who loved her, the old soldier tried to take control again.
- **The counterfeit: mixed-up fathers.** Remi trusted Shepherd, the false parent who used her. The Repentance page names the trap: “trusting the false father’s voice.” Jane turns on Shepherd and stands with her true family.

Almost right: I have to earn my place, or I’ll be thrown away.

Right: I belong, so I can live in the truth.

Why not Release?

Jane has to let go of who she used to be, so Release is a fair guess. But Release is decided by something good that has finished its season. Remi wasn’t good and finished. She was built on a lie. When the story turns on turning from a lie to live as a daughter, it’s Repentance.

Put it into practice

Write down the “soldier” version of you, the one who earns, controls and survives. This week, read Romans 8:14–16 every morning, and each time the soldier shows up, say out loud, “I’m His child.”

PARABLE 25

Wonder Woman 1984

Renouncing the Wish

In *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020), Diana Prince has lived for decades with the loss of Steve Trevor, the man she loved. Then an ancient stone comes into her hands, one that grants a single wish. Without even meaning to, she wishes him back. And he comes back.

But the stone always takes something in return. Slowly, Diana starts losing her strength. She bleeds. She can't do what she once did. The wish that gave her the desire of her heart is draining the very power she was given to protect others. Steve sees it before she does, and he tells her the hard truth: she has to renounce the wish. With tears, she lets him go. And her strength comes back.

The film gets God wrong in one way. The Lord isn't a trickster stone that charges a hidden price for every blessing. Your "heavenly Father" gives "good gifts to those who ask him" (Matthew 7:11). But as a parable, it tells the truth about a danger that only shows up after the answer comes. Diana didn't lose her strength while she was grieving. She lost it after she got what she wanted.

Israel did the same in the wilderness. They demanded what they craved, and "he gave them what they asked for, but he sent a plague along with it" (Psalm 106:15). Leaders do it too. They get the platform or the dream they grasped for, and lose their anointing

in the process. The blessing arrives, and quietly begins to drain the assignment.

Notice what Diana's power was for. Not for herself. It was given to protect others. In the world, power is the goal. In the Kingdom, power is the test, and it is held in trust for other people. When a blessing starts costing the people you were sent to serve, it has stopped being a blessing and become a test.

Abraham faced a test like this. God had given him Isaac, the promise itself, and then asked him to lay it on the altar (Genesis 22). Abraham opened his hands, and God met him on the mountain. Jesus said, "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" (Matthew 16:25).

Is there a wish that came true and is now costing you your strength? Lay it down. What you surrender to God is never lost. He gives back what is truly yours, and power with it.

PARABLE 25

Discernment Drill

Wonder Woman 1984

1. **Observe.** When did Diana’s strength begin to fade: before the wish or after? Who was her strength meant to protect?

2. **Examine.** What does Psalm 106:15 say happened when Israel got what it demanded? What did Abraham do with the promise once he had it?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** With Steve back at her side, what would “almost right” sound like in Diana’s head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there something you asked for and received that now competes with what God gave you to do?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Wonder Woman 1984

Season 8: Reward · Surviving the Anointing

The deciding question: Is the test coming from blessing, success or power that has already arrived?

Yes. Diana's crisis doesn't come in her grief. It comes after the desire of her heart arrives, when the wish begins draining the power she was given for others.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: testing your character with blessing.** Diana got the one thing she wanted most. The question became whether she would keep it at the cost of her calling.
- **The sign: the question has changed from “Will you survive the fire?” to “Will you steward the gold?”** Diana survived decades of loss. The harder test was what to do once the wish came true.
- **The counterfeit: treating blessing as proof of approval.** Getting what we grasped for doesn't mean God gave it. Israel got its craving and a plague with it. Diana's strength came back only when she opened her hands.

Almost right: God, give me what I want.

Right: God, I give You what I want.

Why not Release?

Diana lets go of someone she loves, with tears, and that looks a lot like Release. But Release is decided by something good that has finished its season, and Steve's season had already ended decades before. Diana had lived through that ending. The crisis in this story isn't the loss. It's the wish that brought him back, the blessing she grabbed, and what it does to the power she holds for others. She isn't asked to let go of something ending; she's asked to give back something she was given. When a blessing that arrived is draining your assignment, it's Reward.

Put it into practice

Name one thing you asked for and received that now competes with what God gave you to do. Tell Him this week, “I give You what I want,” and mean it.

Inside Out

Who's at the Controls?

In Pixar's *Inside Out* (2015), we watch the inside of an eleven-year-old girl named Riley. Five emotions, Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear and Disgust, run her life from a control console called Headquarters. When her family moves from Minnesota to San Francisco, everything shakes. Joy and Sadness get lost in the far corners of her memory, and Anger, Fear and Disgust are left at the controls.

It goes badly. The “islands” that make Riley who she is start crumbling, one by one. Anger plants an idea, and Riley sneaks onto a bus to run away. The console goes gray until she can't feel anything at all. Only when Joy and Sadness make it back, and Joy finally lets Sadness take the controls, does Riley get off the bus, go home and cry in her parents' arms.

As a parable, it is a vivid picture of the soul: mind, will and emotions. But notice who is missing from Headquarters. There is no one above the emotions. Riley herself never sits at the console, and nobody else does either. The control room is full of feelings and empty of a Person. The film gets the person wrong. We are more than our feelings. Scripture prays for the whole of us: “may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again” (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

Many believers live exactly like Riley. Whoever shouts loudest gets the controls. Fear drives on Monday, anger on Tuesday, and on Sunday we turn the emotions up as loud as they'll go and call it the presence of God. Then we wonder why our lives feel gray by Thursday. But "letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace" (Romans 8:6).

The answer isn't better emotions at the console. It is the Holy Spirit Himself. You use a power; you relate to a Person. Jesus didn't promise His disciples a better mood. He promised them Someone: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you" (John 14:16). Paul told the Ephesians, "Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18).

David knew who belonged at the console. He didn't deny his feelings. He spoke to them: "Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God!" (Psalm 42:11). His spirit, joined to the Lord, took his soul by the hand.

Your emotions are good gifts and honest messengers. Let them speak. Just don't hand them the keys. Ask the Holy Spirit to take the seat that was always His.

PARABLE 26

Discernment Drill

Inside Out

1. **Observe.** Who runs Headquarters in Riley’s mind? Who is never at the console?

2. **Examine.** What happens to Riley when the loudest feelings are driving? What does the parable say is wrong with the film’s picture of a person?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** What would “almost right” look like in a church service where the feelings are turned all the way up?

4. **Look at your own life.** Which emotion has been at your controls most this month?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

Inside Out

Season 3: Revival · The Cost of Discipleship

The deciding question: Is God’s presence awakening the person to their true identity in Him and a hunger for more of Him?

Yes. The parable’s whole point is the empty seat at Headquarters, and its answer is a Person: the Holy Spirit filling the place no feeling can fill.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: filling you with the Person of the Holy Spirit.** The control room is full of feelings and empty of a Person. Jesus promised “another Advocate.” Paul says, “be filled with the Holy Spirit.”
- **The sign: God is showing you what has filled in your wells.** Anger, Fear and Disgust took over the place meant for Him, and the console went gray. God’s wells don’t run dry; they get filled in. Here, they got filled in with feelings.
- **The counterfeit: hype and noise.** Turning the emotions up and calling it His presence is almost right. Revival isn’t when you cry; revival is when you change.

Almost right: following my heart.

Right: letting the Spirit lead my heart.

Why not Recalculate?

Riley sneaks onto a bus to run away, so Recalculate is a fair guess: fear and anger have taken the wheel. But the bus is a symptom. The parable doesn’t ask which road Riley is on. It asks who belongs at the controls of the soul, and its answer is the Holy Spirit. When the story turns on being filled with His presence, it’s Revival.

Put it into practice

Each time a strong feeling rises this week, name it out loud the way David did. Then pause and ask the Holy Spirit to take the controls before you act.

PARABLE 27

Aladdin

The Third Wish

In Disney's *Aladdin* (1992), Aladdin is a street thief in the city of Agrabah, stealing bread to survive with his monkey, Abu. One day he finds a magic lamp in the Cave of Wonders, and out comes the Genie with three wishes. Aladdin asks what the Genie would wish for. Freedom, the Genie says. So Aladdin makes a promise: his last wish will set the Genie free.

His first wish turns him into Prince Ali, so he can win the heart of Princess Jasmine. It works, almost. On a magic carpet ride, Jasmine realizes he is the boy she met in the marketplace. Instead of telling her the truth, he lies and says he only dresses as a commoner sometimes, to get away from palace life.

Then the test comes. The Genie, who has just saved Aladdin's life, asks for his freedom. And Aladdin refuses. He is afraid that without the Genie's power, he will lose the prince he has become and the princess he has won. The Genie goes back into his lamp, heartbroken.

Meanwhile, the royal advisor Jafar steals the lamp. He wishes to become sultan, then the most powerful sorcerer in the world. Aladdin finally beats him by tricking him into one last wish: to become a genie himself. Jafar gets all the power he wanted, and finds himself trapped inside a lamp.

At the end, Aladdin has one wish left. Everyone urges him to use it to become a prince again. Instead, he keeps his promise and sets the Genie free. And he wins Jasmine anyway, as himself.

As a parable, *Aladdin* shows what happens when blessing arrives faster than character. The lamp gave Aladdin everything he wanted overnight. But the wishes didn't change who he was. They revealed it. When power came, he started building an image, hiding his past, and breaking his word to protect his new position.

King Saul did the same. He started out small in his own eyes. Samuel later reminded him, "Although you may think little of yourself, are you not the leader of the tribes of Israel? The LORD has anointed you king" (1 Samuel 15:17). But Saul spent his reign protecting his image. When he disobeyed God, his excuse was, "I was afraid of the people and did what they demanded" (1 Samuel 15:24).

Jafar is the end of that road. Power without character becomes a prison. He got everything he wished for and ended up in a lamp.

Any of us can be tempted to keep the genie in the lamp, and leaders feel it most. We hold on to the gift, the platform or the image instead of keeping our word. God honors those who "keep their promises even when it hurts" (Psalm 15:4). Aladdin's greatest moment wasn't becoming a prince. It was keeping his word when it cost him the thing that made him look like one.

If you've been hiding behind an image, the way home is not complicated. Tell the truth, keep your word, and let the Father hold

what He gave you. You were loved before you had anything to show for it.

NOTES

PARABLE 27

Discernment Drill

Aladdin

1. **Observe.** What did Aladdin promise the Genie at the start? What did he do when the Genie asked for his freedom, and why?

2. **Examine.** Compare Aladdin, Saul and Jafar. What did power reveal in each of them, and where did each one end up?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** When the Genie asks to be freed, what would “almost right” sound like in Aladdin’s head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a promise you’ve delayed keeping because keeping it might cost you something you’ve gained?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Aladdin

Season 8: Reward · Surviving the Anointing

The deciding question: Is the test coming from blessing, success or power that has already arrived?

Yes. A street thief gets three wishes and becomes a prince overnight. The test is what that power does to his honesty and his word.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: testing your character with blessing.** The wishes didn't change Aladdin. They revealed him: the lie to Jasmine, the broken promise to the Genie.
- **The sign: prayers answered faster than your character can keep up.** The lamp gave Aladdin everything in a day. His integrity was still back in the marketplace.
- **The counterfeit: treating blessing as proof of approval.** Aladdin decided he needed the power to keep what he'd been given. Jafar shows where that ends. In the world power is the goal; in the Kingdom power is the test.

Almost right: I need the power to keep what I've been given.

Right: I keep my word, and let God keep what He has given.

Why not Release?

Aladdin's last wish lets go of the Genie's power, so Release is an understandable guess. But Release is decided by something good that has finished its season. The heart of this story is how blessing tested Aladdin's character: the lies, the image, the broken promise. Setting the Genie free is him finally passing that test. When the story turns on what power reveals, it's Reward.

Put it into practice

Name one promise you've delayed keeping because it might cost you something. Keep it this week.

Rocky

The Trainer Who Saw the Fighter

In *Rocky* (1976), Rocky Balboa is a Philadelphia club fighter who collects debts for a loan shark. Mickey Goldmill, the old gym owner, thinks he's wasting his life and gives his locker away. Then Rocky gets a shot at the heavyweight champion, Apollo Creed, and Mickey shows up at his door asking to train him. Rocky is furious. Where was this man when he needed him? He shouts him out of the apartment. Then he runs down the street after him.

Then comes the training we all remember: the raw eggs, the road work, the frozen sides of beef in the meat locker. The first time Rocky runs the steps of the art museum, he barely makes it. By the end he takes them like a man who knows who he is. His goal for the fight isn't even to win. He just wants to go the distance and still be standing at the final bell. He is.

As a parable, Mickey is a picture of the training hand of God on a life He intends to use. Rocky's address never changes. His neighborhood never changes. The fight in front of him never gets easier. What changes is the man. Mickey wasn't hard on Rocky because he despised him. He was hard on him because he had seen what Rocky could be and refused to let him waste it.

I had a strength coach in college like that. I was sure he was trying to kill me. He was building me.

God isn't hard on you because He's against you. He's hard on you because He sees what you could be.

“No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it’s painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way” (Hebrews 12:11). Many of us, and many churches, want God as a fan in the stands. What we need is a trainer in the corner. And the strength to go the distance was never ours to begin with: “It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies” (Zechariah 4:6).

Paul’s goal sounded a lot like Rocky’s: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful” (2 Timothy 4:7). If the Lord is pushing you hard right now, don’t shout Him out the door. Run after Him. He is getting you ready to stand at the final bell.

PARABLE 28

Discernment Drill

Rocky

1. **Observe.** What does Mickey put Rocky through, and how do the museum steps go the first time compared to the last?

2. **Examine.** Why does Rocky shout Mickey out the door, and what changes when he runs after him? What changes in Rocky's life over the film, and what stays the same?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** The night Mickey shows up at his apartment, what would “almost right” sound like in Rocky's head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Who or what is demanding more of you right now than feels fair?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Rocky

Season 1: Refinement · Divine Training

The deciding question: Is God using pressure to train the person's character, not to punish them or turn them around?

Yes. Rocky stays in the same gym, the same neighborhood and the same fight. Nobody is turning him around, and nobody is punishing him. The pressure is building the man.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: training, not punishing.** The raw eggs, the road work and the frozen beef are hard because Mickey believes in Rocky, not because he despises him. That is the heart of this season: “using pressure to train you, not punish you.”
- **The sign: the pressure is working on your character more than your circumstances.** Rocky's goal isn't to win the fight. It's to go the distance. The outcome of the fight never changes. The character of the fighter does.
- **The counterfeit: treating refinement as punishment.** When Mickey shows up, Rocky hears an insult and throws him out. That is this season's counterfeit, reading the trainer as an enemy. Running down the street after him is the turn.

Almost right: The one who makes it hard on me is against me.

Right: The one who makes me stronger believes in me.

Why not Repeat?

Mickey is an older man pouring himself into a younger one, so Repeat comes to mind. But this story follows Rocky, not Mickey. It asks how the one being trained responds to the hand that is building him. When the camera stays on the one under pressure, it's Refinement. *Creed* (Parable 34) tells the other side, when Rocky becomes the trainer.

Put it into practice

Name the hardest thing God is pushing you through right now. This week, write down one way it is making you stronger, and thank Him for being in your corner.

War Room

The Battle Belongs in the Closet

In *War Room* (2015), Elizabeth Jordan has a nice house, a bright daughter and a marriage that is quietly dying. Her husband, Tony, is cold, proud and drifting toward another woman. Then Elizabeth meets a new client, an elderly widow named Miss Clara, who wants to sell her house.

Miss Clara asks her about her coffee. Elizabeth admits she likes it hot, and Clara hands her a cup that is lukewarm. Then she asks a harder question: how hot is your faith? She takes Elizabeth to a small closet in her house, its walls covered with written prayers and Scriptures. It is her war room. Clara tells her that her husband isn't the enemy, and she can't fight for her marriage with her mouth. She has to fight on her knees.

Elizabeth empties her own closet, clothes and all, and starts to pray. In time, Tony turns around.

As a parable, the coffee is the whole story. Elizabeth's faith wasn't dead. It was lukewarm: correct, polite and powerless. What she needed wasn't a better strategy for her marriage. She needed God Himself, and she needed Him badly enough to clear out a closet for it.

Jesus said to a lukewarm church, "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). Then, a few verses later, He says something tender: “Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends” (Revelation 3:20). The cure for lukewarm isn’t trying harder. It’s opening the door to His presence.

Notice what Elizabeth gave up. Her closet was full of good things. She emptied it to make room for prayer. Revival always costs something. And notice what Miss Clara couldn’t do. She could show Elizabeth the closet. She couldn’t live in it for her. Borrowed fire stays lukewarm.

And the battle was never really with the people in her house. “We are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world” (Ephesians 6:12).

So find your closet. “When you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private” (Matthew 6:6). A hot faith rarely starts on a stage. It starts behind a closed door, when prayer stops being a duty and becomes the air you breathe.

PARABLE 29

Discernment Drill

War Room

1. **Observe.** What did Miss Clara’s coffee test reveal? What did Elizabeth do with her closet?

2. **Examine.** What did Elizabeth need most: a strategy for her marriage, or something else? What does Revelation 3:20 offer to a lukewarm heart?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** What would “almost right” look like for a wife who decides to fight harder for her marriage?

4. **Look at your own life.** How hot is your faith right now? What would you have to clear out to make room for prayer?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

War Room

Season 3: Revival • The Cost of Discipleship

The deciding question: Is God's presence awakening the person to their true identity in Him and a hunger for more of Him?

Yes. A lukewarm heart catches fire when Elizabeth clears out a closet and starts meeting God there. The center is His presence, not a marriage technique.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: filling you with the Person of the Holy Spirit.** Elizabeth didn't need a better argument with Tony. She needed God. The door Jesus knocks on in Revelation 3:20 opens into His presence.
- **The sign: prayer moving from a duty to a necessity.** Elizabeth empties her closet and fights on her knees. That shift is one of the clearest signs of this season.
- **The counterfeit: hype and noise.** Miss Clara could show her the closet but couldn't live in it for her. Borrowed fire, a moving film or a stirring service can't replace a hungry heart behind a closed door.

Almost right: fighting for my family.

Right: fighting for my family on my knees.

Why not Repeat?

Miss Clara is a spiritual mother, so Repeat is a fair pick. But the story keeps pointing past Clara to Elizabeth's own closet. Clara could show her the way. She couldn't pray her prayers. When the story turns on a lukewarm heart catching fire in God's presence, it's Revival.

Put it into practice

Choose a place this week that can be your closet, and clear out whatever is in the way. Shut the door, write one prayer for someone in your house, and put it on the wall.

Inception

The Ghost in the Dream

In Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), Dom Cobb is a thief who slips into people's dreams to steal their secrets. He is the best in the world at it. But he can't go home. His wife, Mal, has died, and Cobb is blamed for her death. His two young children are in America, and he is stranded overseas, desperate to see them again.

Cobb carries a secret. Years earlier, he and Mal spent what felt like decades together in a dream world they built themselves. When it was time to leave, Mal didn't want to go. So Cobb planted an idea in her mind, that her world wasn't real, to get her to wake up. It worked. But back in the real world, the idea stayed with her, and he lost her.

Now, every time Cobb goes into a dream, Mal shows up. She isn't really Mal. She is a projection, built out of his memory and his guilt. And she wrecks everything. She sabotages his missions, puts his team in danger, and begs him to stay with her. A young architect on his team finally sees what is happening. Cobb has been keeping Mal alive in his dreams because he can't let her go.

In the end, deep in the lowest level of the dream, Cobb faces her. He admits what he did. He tells her she is only a shadow of the real woman he loved, and he chooses to leave her behind. Then he wakes up, goes home and sees his children's faces again.

As a parable, *Inception* shows what happens when we won't release what has ended. Cobb's love for his wife was the best thing in his life. But that season was over, and the version of her he kept alive was made of grief and guilt. It sabotaged every new thing he tried to build. Many of us carry a Mal: a lost relationship, a season that ended badly, a version of someone we hold on to in our memory. We visit it at night. It keeps us from going home.

King David knew the pain of loss. When his infant son died, his servants were afraid to tell him. But David got up, washed, changed his clothes and went to worship. He said, "Can I bring him back again? I will go to him one day, but he cannot return to me" (2 Samuel 12:23). David grieved deeply. Then he let God carry what he could not.

If you are grieving, hear this first: grief is not a failure of faith, and no one gets to put you on a clock. Biblical feelings and biblical facts belong together. But there is also "a time to keep and a time to throw away" (Ecclesiastes 3:6). Letting go of the shadow doesn't mean you stop loving what was real. It means you stop letting a ghost decide whether you get to go home.

PARABLE 30

Discernment Drill

Inception

1. **Observe.** Who is the Mal that shows up in Cobb's dreams, and what does she do to his work? What happens right after he leaves her behind?

2. **Examine.** What exactly was Cobb holding on to: Mal, or something else? What did holding on keep him from?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Deep in the dream, with Mal begging him to stay, what would "almost right" sound like in Cobb's head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a "Mal" you keep visiting, a loss or a version of someone that keeps sabotaging what you're trying to build?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

Inception

Season 7: Release · Divine Pruning

The deciding question: Is the person being asked to let go of something good that has finished its season?

Yes. Cobb's marriage was the best thing in his life, and it has ended. What he keeps alive in his dreams is a shadow of it, and it keeps him from home.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: cutting away what has finished its season.** The moment Cobb lets the shadow go, he wakes up and goes home to his children. God prunes so there will be more fruit.
- **The sign: you are still mourning a Saul God has already set aside.** Cobb keeps a shadow of Mal alive night after night. It's hard to build the new thing while you're still mourning the old one.
- **The counterfeit: holding on to what has finished.** Every new thing Cobb builds is wrecked by what he won't release. The projection is the counterfeit of this season with a face.

Almost right: If I let go, it means I didn't really love them.

Right: I can honor what was real and still let God carry what has ended.

Why not Repentance?

Cobb's breakthrough includes admitting what he did, so Repentance is a reasonable guess. But his confession isn't the turning point. The turning point is choosing to leave a shadow behind. When what has to go is a loved thing that has ended, it's Release.

Put it into practice

Name the "Mal" you keep visiting. This week, tell God what was real, tell Him what you need to let go of, and ask Him to carry it. If the loss is still raw, don't carry it alone; invite a pastor or trusted friend in.

Shutter Island

The Power of Self-Deception

In Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island* (2010), it is 1954, and U.S. Marshal Teddy Daniels arrives with his partner at a hospital for the criminally insane on an island off Boston. A patient has vanished from a locked room. The doctors seem to be hiding something. Teddy is haunted by migraines, memories of the war, and dreams of his wife, who he says died in a fire. The deeper he digs, the more convinced he becomes that the hospital is the villain.

Then the truth comes out. Teddy Daniels doesn't exist. He is Andrew Laeddis, a patient on the island. Years earlier, his wife, deeply troubled, took the lives of their three children, and Andrew took hers. He had seen that she needed help and didn't get it for her. The guilt was more than he could carry, so his mind built a different story, one where he was the hero, the investigator, the good man. The entire "investigation" was a role-play the doctors allowed, hoping that if they let him live out his story to the end, he would finally see the truth.

For a moment, he does. He remembers everything and says it out loud. But the next morning, he talks as if he is still Teddy. Before he walks away with the orderlies, he asks a haunting question: would it be worse "to live as a monster, or to die as a good man?" The film leaves us wondering whether he slipped back into the lie, or chose it.

The film is about a man with a deep mental illness, and real trauma deserves gentleness and good care, not a sermon. But as a parable, *Shutter Island* exposes the power of self-deception. A. W. Tozer wrote, “Of all forms of deception, self-deception is the most deadly, and of all deceived persons, the self-deceived are the least likely to discover the fraud.” He also wrote:

The self-deceived is his own enemy and is working a fraud upon himself. He wants to believe the lie and is psychologically conditioned to do so. He does not resist the deceit but collaborates with it against himself. There is no struggle, because the victim surrenders before the fight begins. He enjoys being deceived.

A. W. Tozer

That is Andrew. The doctors didn’t lie to him. He collaborated with the lie, because the truth was too painful to face, and the lie felt like protection.

Most of us know how to build a Teddy Daniels, a version of the story where we are the investigator and never the guilty one. This isn’t about the wounds others caused you; victims are never to blame for what was done to them. It’s about the places we hide our own part. “The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?” (Jeremiah 17:9). John wrote it plainly: “If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth” (1 John 1:8). And the very next verse is the door out: “But if we confess our sins

to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness” (1 John 1:9).

King David lived in his own cover story for months after his sin with Bathsheba. God sent the prophet Nathan, who told him a parable about a rich man who stole a poor man’s only lamb. David burned with anger at the man in the story. Then Nathan said, “You are that man!” (2 Samuel 12:7). A story got past David’s defenses, and he broke. Psalm 51 is what came out of him.

James warned that hearing the truth without acting on it “is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like” (James 1:23–24). Andrew saw his face, and then forgot it. David saw his, and came home.

The truth, as painful as it is, is where healing begins. At the cross, Jesus already carried the guilt we are afraid to look at, so we don’t need a lie to protect us. You don’t have to die as a good man in a story that isn’t true. You can live as a forgiven one in a story that is.

NOTES

PARABLE 31

Discernment Drill

Shutter Island

1. **Observe.** Who does Teddy believe he is, and who is he really? What happens the morning after he remembers?

2. **Examine.** Why did Andrew build the Teddy story? Compare what Andrew did with the truth to what David did with it after Nathan's parable.

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Andrew remembered everything and said it out loud. Why wasn't that enough?

4. **Look at your own life.** Where have you told yourself a more comfortable story than the truth about your own part?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

Shutter Island

Season 2: Repentance · Orphans No More

The deciding question: Is the person turning from sin or a lie about themselves to agree with God's truth?

Yes. Andrew's prison isn't the island. It's a lie he built to avoid his own part, and the only way out is to turn from it to the truth.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: bringing you home as a son or daughter.** David saw his face in Nathan's story and came home: Psalm 51. The truth is the road back to the Father, and 1 John 1:9 is the open door.
- **The sign: a hidden secret keeps pulling you back into hiding.** Andrew's guilt was so heavy he built a whole identity to hide in. Like Adam in the garden, he hid from what he had done.
- **The counterfeit: sorry without change.** Andrew saw the truth, said it out loud, and by morning surrendered to the old story again. Remorse that never becomes a changed mind is the counterfeit of this season.

Almost right: I saw the truth for a moment.

Right: I'll live in the truth, even when it hurts.

Why not Recalculate?

Andrew is lost in a story that leads him further off course, so Recalculate is a reasonable guess. But Recalculate is decided by a wrong road chosen by your plan, fear or comfort. This story turns on a lie Andrew believes about himself and whether he will turn from it. When the problem is the lie inside, not the road outside, it's Repentance.

Put it into practice

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you one place where you've told yourself a more comfortable story than the truth. Bring it into the light with God, and with one trusted person, this week. If what surfaces involves trauma, invite a pastor or counselor to walk with you.

The Man in the Iron Mask

Something About My Face

In *The Man in the Iron Mask* (1998), it is 1662, and France is starving under young King Louis XIV, played by Leonardo DiCaprio. Louis is cruel and selfish. He feeds the poor rotten food, sends a young soldier to die so he can take the soldier's beloved, and orders rioters shot.

Three aging musketeers, Athos, Porthos and Aramis, break a prisoner out of a remote island prison. He has spent years with his head locked inside an iron mask. When they free him, they reveal his secret. He is Philippe, Louis's identical twin brother. The night Louis was born, Queen Anne gave birth to twins. To keep the brothers from fighting over the throne, the old king hid the second son in the countryside and told the queen he had died. When Louis took the throne and learned of his brother, he had Philippe locked away in a mask, so no one would ever see the face of the man who could replace him.

Sitting with the musketeers, Philippe tells them what he thought all those years. He thought there was something about his face that men did not want him to see. Something that made them cruel. Then he realized they were cruel even while he wore the mask.

The musketeers train Philippe to walk, talk and dance like a king. At a masked ball they swap the brothers, but the plot fails, and Philippe is thrown back into the mask. Finally, the musketeers

storm the Bastille to free him one last time. Louis's own guards refuse to shoot them. The captain of the guard, d'Artagnan, the twins' real father, dies shielding Philippe from Louis's blade. Philippe takes the throne, and the film says he became one of the greatest kings France ever had.

As a parable, Philippe's mask is what the enemy does to the people of God. He didn't lock Philippe up because his face was ugly. He locked him up because of whose face it was. The devil is determined to prevent you from perceiving yourself with the same value and significance as God does. He covers the face because of the glory it was made to carry.

Scripture tells this story with wells. Isaac grew so blessed "that the Philistines became jealous of him. So the Philistines filled up all of Isaac's wells with dirt. These were the wells that had been dug by the servants of his father, Abraham" (Genesis 26:14–15). Envy covered what God had given. And Isaac "reopened the wells his father had dug" (26:18). God's wells don't run dry; they get filled in.

Revival is God re-digging the wells and taking off the mask. Moses came down from the mountain "and he wasn't aware that his face had become radiant because he had spoken to the LORD" (Exodus 34:29). Paul says that glory is now for all of us: "whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:16–18).

Notice what didn't work. Training Philippe to act like Louis, to perform the part, failed at the ball. What revealed who he really was was his heart: d'Artagnan knew the switch had happened because the new king was kind. Revival isn't learning to act the part. It's the Spirit changing you "into his glorious image."

Some of us have worn the mask so long we stopped shouting. Let Him take it off. He knows your face, and He isn't afraid of it.

NOTES

PARABLE 32

Discernment Drill

The Man in the Iron Mask

1. **Observe.** Why did Louis lock Philippe in the mask? What did Philippe come to believe about his own face?

2. **Examine.** What failed at the masked ball, and what finally gave Philippe away as the true king? What did the Philistines do to Isaac's wells, and why?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Freed from prison, Philippe is drilled to walk and talk like Louis. Why is that "almost right"?

4. **Look at your own life.** What "mask" has the enemy put over you? What dirt has been thrown into the wells God dug in your life?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

The Man in the Iron Mask

Season 3: Revival · The Cost of Discipleship

The deciding question: Is God’s presence awakening the person to their true identity in Him and a hunger for more of Him?

Yes. The enemy masks the face because of the glory it was made to carry. Revival is the Spirit removing the veil: “wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

The evidence

- **What God is doing: filling you with the Person of the Holy Spirit.** Moses’ face shone because he had been with God. The Spirit takes the veil away so “all of us” can reflect His glory.
- **The sign: God is showing you what has filled in your wells.** The Philistines filled Isaac’s wells out of envy. Louis masked Philippe out of fear. Both covered what was given. Revival digs it back out.
- **The counterfeit: performance in place of the Person.** Training Philippe to act like a king failed. What revealed him was a changed heart. Revival isn’t when you cry; revival is when you change.

Almost right: I’ll learn to act the part.

Right: I’ll let His Spirit take the mask off and change me into His image.

Why Revival has the edge: the Repentance overlap

Philippe believes a lie about himself, so Repentance is a meaningful overlap: turning from that lie. Revival has the edge because the parable centers on the unveiling of his true identity. The mask comes off, and the person hidden beneath it begins to emerge. Repentance describes turning from the lie; Revival describes awakening to who God created him to be. Both movements can happen together.

Put it into practice

This week, spend time in God’s presence with nothing to perform. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you one place the enemy has covered what God put in you, and ask Him to dig it out.

The Matrix

Wake Up

In *The Matrix* (1999), Thomas Anderson works at a software company by day. At night he is a hacker named Neo, sitting up in front of his computer long after everyone else is asleep, searching. He can't explain it, but he knows something is wrong with the world. He is hunting for a man named Morpheus and for the answer to one question: what is the Matrix? When he finally meets a woman named Trinity, she tells him she knows why he can't sleep. It's the question that drives them both.

Morpheus offers him a choice. Take the blue pill, and he wakes up in his bed and believes whatever he wants to believe. Take the red pill, and he sees how deep the rabbit hole goes. Neo takes the red pill, and he wakes up in a pod of fluid, cables in his body, one of millions. The world he knew was a computer program, and the people around him are asleep. Aboard the crew's ship, his body is so weak he can barely move. He asks Morpheus why his eyes hurt. Morpheus answers, "You've never used them before."

The awakening costs him everything he knew. And not everyone thinks it's worth it. One of the crew, Cypher, grows tired of the hard, cold reality of the ship. Sitting in a restaurant inside the program, eating a steak he knows isn't real, he makes a deal to betray his friends in exchange for being plugged back in and forgetting everything. Ignorance, he decides, is bliss.

Neo goes the other way. He trains, falls on his first jump, gets up, and keeps going. By the end of the film he sees the Matrix for what it is, streams of green code, and the bullets stop in midair. The world never changed. His eyes did. He has woken up to who he is and what he was born to do.

The film borrows Christian images and mixes them with many other ideas, so take it as a picture, not a gospel. But as a parable, *The Matrix* is a picture of awakening. Long before the red pill, Neo was hungry. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't settle for the world as it was handed to him. Revival always starts there: with a hunger that won't let you rest. "As the deer longs for streams of water, so I long for you, O God. I thirst for God, the living God" (Psalm 42:1–2).

Paul wrote, "Awake, O sleeper, rise up from the dead, and Christ will give you light" (Ephesians 5:14). Many believers are living in a kind of Matrix: comfortable, busy, half-asleep, surrounded by a church culture that has learned to live without the presence of God. Then the Spirit wakes someone up, and their eyes hurt at first. "For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light!" (Ephesians 5:8).

But awakening costs something. Cypher is the warning. He tasted reality and decided he would rather have the steak. Many people have touched a real move of God and gone back to the comfortable illusion because the presence was harder than the program. Revival isn't when you cry; revival is when you change.

If you can't sleep because you know there has to be more, that hunger is not a problem. It's an invitation. Take the red pill. Wake up.

PARABLE 33

Discernment Drill

The Matrix

1. **Observe.** What was Neo doing night after night before he ever met Morpheus? What did Cypher choose, and why?

2. **Examine.** What did waking up cost Neo, and what did it give him? What does Ephesians 5:14 call believers to do?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Cypher had seen the truth. What made his choice “almost right” in his own mind?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a hunger in you that won’t let you settle? Or have you gone back to the steak?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

The Matrix

Season 3: Revival • The Cost of Discipleship

The deciding question: Is God’s presence awakening the person to their true identity in Him and a hunger for more of Him?

Yes. The story starts with a hunger that won’t let Neo sleep and turns on an awakening that costs him everything. “Awake, O sleeper... and Christ will give you light.”

The evidence

- **What God is doing: waking you up and filling you with His light.** Neo’s eyes are opened to a reality he never knew, and he wakes to his identity and calling. That is what the Spirit does in revival: “Christ will give you light.”
- **The sign: a fresh hunger for God’s presence, more than His gifts.** Neo couldn’t sleep. He was driven by a question. “I thirst for God, the living God.” Revival begins with a hunger the world can’t satisfy.
- **The counterfeit: hype and noise, the comfortable illusion.** Cypher tasted reality and traded it for a steak and a familiar program. Going back to the comfortable version is the counterfeit of every awakening.

Almost right: Ignorance is bliss.

Right: Wake me up, whatever it costs.

Why not Repentance?

The world Neo knew was a lie, and Repentance exposes lies, so it’s a strong guess. But this parable starts before the lie is exposed. It starts with a hunger that won’t let Neo rest, and it ends with him awake to his calling. Cypher shows what’s at stake: not a sin to turn from, but an awakening to hold on to. When the story turns on hunger and awakening, it’s Revival.

Put it into practice

This week, give God the hour you’d normally spend on a screen at night. Tell Him honestly what you’re hungry for, and ask Him to wake you up.

PARABLE 34

Creed

The Son of the Man He Fought

In *Creed* (2015), Adonis Johnson is the son of the great heavyweight champion Apollo Creed, born from an affair. He never knew his father. As a boy he bounces through foster homes and a youth detention center, fighting everyone, until Apollo's widow, Mary Anne, shows up and takes him home. She gives him a family, an education and a good job. But Adonis can't shake the fight in his blood. He quits his job, gets turned away by the gyms in Los Angeles, and heads to Philadelphia to find the one man who knew his father in the ring: Rocky Balboa.

Rocky is old now, running a small restaurant, done with boxing. He has buried his wife, lost his friends, and drifted from his own son. At first he says no. But Adonis keeps showing up, and Rocky starts to train him. The old fighter who was once trained by Mickey in a run-down gym now becomes the trainer in the corner for the son of his greatest rival and closest friend.

Then Rocky is diagnosed with cancer, and he refuses treatment. He has watched chemotherapy fail the woman he loved, and he doesn't want to fight anymore. It is Adonis who refuses to let him quit. The young man won't train unless the old man fights for his life. So they fight together. Rocky goes through treatment while Adonis trains for the biggest fight of his career. When the night comes, Adonis steps into the ring in American flag trunks like the

ones his father and Rocky once wore. He loses a split decision, but he goes the distance, and the world finally sees whose son he is.

The film ends with the two of them slowly climbing the steps of the Philadelphia art museum, the same steps a young Rocky once ran.

As a parable, *Creed* is a picture of what happens when wounded men choose to become fathers. Adonis had every reason to repeat what was done to him: an absent father, a hard childhood, a life spent swinging at the world. Rocky had every reason to quit: grief, regret, and a son who no longer called. Instead, each one gave the other what he never had. “God places the lonely in families” (Psalm 68:6).

Rocky knows what it is to be overlooked. In the first film, Mickey gave his locker away and ignored him for years, and only came to him when the title shot came. Now Rocky does for Apollo’s son what was not done for him: he shows up before there is any title shot at all. Peter Vescovi put it this way: “Break the cycle by doing for others that which was not done for you.”

As Elijah was taken up, Elisha cried out, “My father! My father!” (2 Kings 2:12), and then he picked up the mantle Elijah left behind. That mantle was meant to be passed on. Paul told the Corinthians, “For even if you had ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, you have only one spiritual father” (1 Corinthians 4:15). Teachers give you a map for the wilderness. Fathers walk through it with you. The Church has plenty of coaches, critics and

fans. It needs more fathers and mothers who will climb into the corner for someone else's son or daughter.

**The wound you received can stop with you, and the blessing
can start with you.**

NOTES

PARABLE 34

Discernment Drill

Creed

1. **Observe.** What did Adonis grow up without? What had Rocky lost by the time Adonis found him?

2. **Examine.** Compare how Mickey first treated Rocky with how Rocky treats Adonis. What is Rocky doing differently, and why does it matter?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** What would “almost right” sound like in a young man with Adonis’s childhood? In an old man with Rocky’s grief?

4. **Look at your own life.** What was missing in your own story? What have you done with that empty place?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Creed

Season 9: Repeat · Break the Cycle

The deciding question: Is God fathering you so you can give the next generation the care and discipleship you needed?

Yes. An old fighter steps into the corner for the son of his rival, doing for him what was not done for himself. The story turns on what passes between them.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: making you a father or mother to the next generation.** Rocky, who had drifted even from his own son, becomes a father in the corner for a fatherless young man.
- **The sign: you see your parents' patterns showing up in you.** Adonis has his father's fight in his blood, and he grew up fighting the world alone, the way his father left him. Rocky had drifted from his own son. Both patterns could have repeated. Neither did.
- **The counterfeit: repeating what was done to you because it's familiar.** Mickey ignored Rocky until there was a title shot. Rocky shows up for Adonis before there is one. "Break the cycle by doing for others that which was not done for you."

Almost right: Nobody was there for me, so I'll make it on my own.

Right: God fathered me so I could father someone else.

Why not Refinement?

There is plenty of sweat and pain in *Creed*, so Refinement is a reasonable guess. And *Rocky* (Parable 28) is Refinement. But *Rocky* follows the one under the trainer's hand. *Creed* follows what passes between two generations. When the story turns on one generation pouring into the next, it's Repeat.

Put it into practice

Name one younger person God has put in your path. This week, step into their corner: call them, encourage them, or teach them one thing you learned the hard way.

Snow White and the Huntsman

The Girl in the Tower

In *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), the sorceress Ravenna marries a grieving king, kills him, and takes his kingdom. She keeps her power by draining the youth and beauty of others. The king's young daughter, Snow White, is locked away in a tower, and she stays there for years, forgotten by the kingdom and hidden from the world.

Then Ravenna's magic mirror tells her something she doesn't want to hear. Snow White, now grown, is the one who can destroy her. Ravenna sends men to take the girl's heart. Snow White escapes into the Dark Forest, a place where the queen has no power.

Ravenna hires a broken, grieving huntsman named Eric to bring her back. Instead, he ends up protecting her. Along the way, he teaches her a simple move: how to strike when an enemy comes close. It seems like a small lesson on a long, dark road. She is chased, betrayed, and even poisoned with an apple, and for a moment it looks like the queen has won. But Snow White wakes. She rallies an army, marches on the castle, and comes face to face with Ravenna. When the queen moves in for the kill, Snow White uses the very move the huntsman taught her and ends Ravenna's reign.

As a parable, Snow White's story shows something we often miss: the enemy knew who Snow White was before she did. The mirror

told Ravenna what that girl in the tower would become, and that is exactly why Ravenna kept her locked away. The enemy often fights hardest against what he fears you will become.

But the tower, the forest and the small lessons weren't wasted. What the enemy meant as a prison, God used as a training ground. Many of us have spent years in a tower: overlooked, shut in, waiting, wondering if God has forgotten us. Faithful in small things no one sees. And all along, He was forming a ruler. "Praise the LORD, who is my rock. He trains my hands for war and gives my fingers skill for battle" (Psalm 144:1).

David spent years in the shepherd's field before he ever saw Goliath. When Saul doubted him, David said, "I have done this to both lions and bears, and I'll do it to this pagan Philistine, too" (1 Samuel 17:36). The lessons nobody saw in the field were the ones that won the battle in the valley.

In the Church we sometimes treat the hidden years as a punishment, and rush people out of them. But God doesn't waste a single lesson. The move that seemed small in the forest was the one that won the war.

Peter wrote to believers walking through their own dark forest: "So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation" (1 Peter 5:10).

If you feel locked away, hear this: your Father hasn't forgotten you in the tower. He has been training you there, and He knows the day you'll walk out.

PARABLE 35

Discernment Drill

Snow White and the Huntsman

1. **Observe.** Why did Ravenna keep Snow White locked away? What small thing did the huntsman teach her, and when did she use it?

2. **Examine.** What did the enemy mean the tower and the forest to be? What did they turn out to be? How does David's time in the field fit the same pattern?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** After years in the tower, what would "almost right" sound like in Snow White's head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a hidden season in your life that you've written off as wasted?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

Snow White and the Huntsman

Season 1: Refinement · Divine Training

The deciding question: Is God using pressure to train the person's character, not to punish them or turn them around?

Yes. Snow White did nothing to deserve the tower, and she isn't on a wrong road. The hidden years and the dark forest become her training ground.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: using pressure to train you, not punish you.** What the enemy meant as a prison became preparation. "He trains my hands for war."
- **The sign: you are in a hidden place, faithful in small things no one sees.** Years in a tower, a small lesson on a dark road. Like David with the lions and bears, the unseen lessons win the visible battle.
- **The counterfeit: treating refinement as punishment.** The Church sometimes treats the hidden years as wasted and rushes people out of them. That is the counterfeit this parable exposes.

Almost right: The years in the tower were wasted.

Right: God was training me for a battle I couldn't see yet.

Why not Revolution?

Snow White ends up leading an army against the queen, so Revolution is a reasonable guess. But most of the story happens before that: the tower, the forest, the small lesson, the poisoned apple. The battle at the end is where the training pays off. When the story is about the hidden years that prepare you, it's Refinement.

Put it into practice

Write down one lesson from a hard, hidden season of your life. Thank God for it this week, and ask Him what it might be preparing you for.

The Flash (TV Series)

A Tale of Three Fathers

In the first season of *The Flash* (2014–2015), Barry Allen is a young crime-scene investigator with a wound he has carried since he was a boy. When he was eleven, his mother was killed in their living room by a man wrapped in yellow lightning. No one believed his story. His father, Henry, was convicted of the murder and sent to prison. For years afterward, Barry talks to his dad through a sheet of glass.

Barry is raised by Joe West, the police detective who took him in. Joe is present. He feeds him, disciplines him, loves him like his own son. But for years, Joe believes the worst about Henry. He thinks Barry's real father is guilty.

Then a lightning strike gives Barry super speed, and a brilliant scientist named Harrison Wells takes him under his wing. Wells trains him, pushes him, praises him, and makes him faster than anyone thought possible. He becomes the mentor Barry always wanted. But Wells is not who he says he is. He is the man in yellow. He killed Barry's mother, framed his father, and has been training Barry all along for one reason: he needs Barry fast enough to open a door back to his own time.

As a parable, this show gave me a picture I've never forgotten: every one of us has the same three fathers.

The first is the true Father. Like Henry, God is often blamed for what the enemy did. People look at the wreckage in their living room, say, “God did this,” and keep Him behind the glass. Yet even from behind the glass, the true father only wants his son free. “Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father... He never changes or casts a shifting shadow” (James 1:17).

The second is the father who raised you. Like Joe, he may have loved you well and still believed some things that weren’t true. We are called to honor him, observe him and learn from him. But he was never meant to define you.

The third is the false father. He trains you. He flatters you. He can even make you faster. But Jesus said of him, “He was a murderer from the beginning... he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Every lesson he gives serves his escape, not your destiny.

In the finale, Wells offers Barry the one thing he wants most: go back in time and save his mother. Henry tells him not to change the past. Joe, out of love, tells him to go. Barry runs back to that night, and he lets the past stand. He kneels by his dying mother, tells her who he is, and promises her that he and his dad are okay. Then he comes back and tells the false father he already has the family he needs.

The trouble starts when we mix up our fathers. We give the liar’s voice the trust that belongs to God. We give our earthly father the authority to name us. Or we blame the true Father for wounds the

enemy caused. Repentance begins when we change our mind about which father is which.

The man in yellow is real, but he doesn't get the last word. "The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life" (John 10:10). Come out from behind the glass. Your Father was never the one who did this.

NOTES

PARABLE 36

Discernment Drill

The Flash (TV Series)

1. **Observe.** Name Barry's three fathers. What did each one give him, and what did each one get wrong or hide?

2. **Examine.** Who was blamed for what the man in yellow did? Whose voice did Barry trust most, and what changed in the finale?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Wells made Barry faster than anyone. What would "almost right" sound like in Barry's head about trusting him?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a wound you have blamed on God that the enemy caused?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

The Flash (TV Series)

Season 2: Repentance · Orphans No More

The deciding question: Is the person turning from sin or a lie about themselves to agree with God's truth?

Yes. The problem is a lie about fathers: the true father blamed for the enemy's crime, and the enemy trusted as a mentor. Barry has to change his mind about which voice to trust.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: bringing you home as a son or daughter.** Barry had a father who loved him, yet grew up talking to him through glass and looking for a father elsewhere.
- **The sign: God is exposing a lie you have believed about Him.** Barry gave his trust to the mentor who praised him, and that mentor turned out to be the man in yellow. The lie is exposed, and Barry's mind changes about which voice to trust.
- **The counterfeit: mixed-up fathers.** Joe blamed the true father for the enemy's crime. Barry trusted the false father because he made him faster. The Repentance page names both traps: "trusting the false father's voice, or blaming God for wounds someone else caused."

Almost right: The voice that made me faster must be the one to trust.

Right: I trust the Father who never changes, even when another voice gives me more.

Why not Release?

Barry lets his mother go in the finale, as in *The Flash* (Parable 3). But that film is built around the loss. This season is built around three fathers, and it ends with Barry telling the false father he already has the family he needs. When the story turns on seeing the true Father clearly, it's Repentance.

Put it into practice

This week, write down one thing you have blamed God for. Ask the Holy Spirit who really did it, and what the Father wants you to see instead.

The Lincoln Lawyer

The Sons of Eli Generation

In *The Lincoln Lawyer* (2011), Matthew McConaughey plays Mickey Haller, a Los Angeles defense attorney who works out of the back seat of his Lincoln. He lands a dream client: Louis Roulet, played by Ryan Phillippe, the charming son of a wealthy Beverly Hills real estate family, accused of brutally beating a woman. Louis's mother, Mary Windsor, has the money and the power to make problems go away, and she has spent his life doing exactly that. It isn't the first time the family has made a charge against her son disappear.

Haller slowly realizes his client is guilty, not only of this assault but of an earlier murder that sent another of Haller's clients to prison for a crime he didn't commit. Louis isn't sorry. He is confident. He has learned that someone will always cover for him. And in the end, Haller discovers just how far the covering goes. When his investigator gets close to the truth, he is shot dead. The killer is Louis's mother. She comes to Haller's home with the same gun, confesses, and tries to kill him too, all to protect her son.

As a parable, the most dangerous person in this story may not be the son. It's the love that never let him face a consequence. His mother's untethered empathy fed his entitlement, and he never learned the principle of sowing and reaping for sinful actions. She covered his tracks at all costs under the banner of unconditional

love, which quietly taught him, “I will not be punished for the harm I have sown.”

What she believed was compassion slowly became corruption. By shielding him from consequences, she trained him to confuse love with protection from Biblical justice. Instead of forming character, her version of love coddled his immaturity and reinforced the lie, “I will not be held accountable for my actions.” If I’m allowing it, I’m coaching it.

Scripture has a name for this kind of house. “Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels who had no respect for the LORD” (1 Samuel 2:12). Eli was a priest, and his sons served at the Tabernacle, stealing from the offerings and sleeping with the women who served at the entrance. Eli knew. He even scolded them: “You must stop, my sons!” (2:24). But he never stopped them. God’s charge against him was blunt: “Why do you give your sons more honor than you give me?” (2:29). And God told Samuel that judgment was coming on Eli’s family “because his sons are blaspheming God and he hasn’t disciplined them” (3:13).

Here is the part that should shake the Church. “Now in those days messages from the LORD were very rare, and visions were quite uncommon” (3:1). The house of God had gone quiet, and a family that refused to correct its own was part of the reason. This is why revival tarries. God will not pour out His presence on a house that protects what He has called sin.

“You will always harvest what you plant” (Galatians 6:7). Love does not always feel good. Real love involves accountability, and

love should care more about character development than personal comfort. “For the LORD disciplines those he loves” (Hebrews 12:6).

The good news is that God didn’t abandon Israel to Eli’s road. He raised up a boy named Samuel who would listen: “Speak, your servant is listening” (3:10). It isn’t too late to turn your house around. Love them enough to let them reap, and pray them home.

NOTES

PARABLE 37

Discernment Drill

The Lincoln Lawyer

1. **Observe.** What had Mary Windsor been doing for her son long before this case? How far did she go in the end?

2. **Examine.** What did Louis learn from a lifetime of being covered for? What did Eli do about his sons, and what did he fail to do? What was happening to God's voice in Israel at the same time?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** What would "almost right" sound like in a parent covering for a grown child one more time?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there someone you keep rescuing from the harvest of their own choices? Who has been rescuing you?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

The Lincoln Lawyer

Season 5: Recalculate • Why Revival Tarries

The deciding question: Is God correcting a direction chosen through self-reliance or missing what He is saying?

Yes, and that is the warning. A mother's "compassion" and Eli's comfort put whole families on the road to ruin. God's answer in Eli's day was to turn Israel around through Samuel.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: rerouting you when your plan overrules His.** Eli's plan was to scold and keep the peace. Mary's plan was to make every consequence disappear. God's design was discipline that forms character. When Eli's house wouldn't turn, God raised up Samuel to turn the nation.
- **The sign: fear, comfort or a person has quietly taken the wheel.** The son took the wheel of his mother's life, and her need to spare him pain steered everything. Eli honored his sons more than God.
- **The counterfeit: mislabeling the wilderness.** Mary called enabling "unconditional love" and called consequences cruelty. Recalculate's counterfeit gets the labels backward, and a house that does it goes quiet: "messages from the LORD were very rare."

Almost right: Love protects them from consequences.

Right: Love lets them reap, so they can be saved.

Why not Repeat?

Parenting makes Repeat a meaningful overlap: this story shows the harm caused when faithful care is missing. Repeat's purpose is to receive God's fathering and give others the care you lacked. Here the primary emphasis is the wrong direction created by enabling, and the correction it requires. That gives Recalculate the edge.

Put it into practice

Name one person you keep rescuing from the harvest of their own choices. This week, ask God whether your "help" is protecting them from Him, and take one step toward letting Him do His work.

The Book of Eli

Carrying the Word West

The Book of Eli (2010) is set about thirty years after a war has burned the world down. The cities are ruins, water is precious, and gangs rule the roads. Denzel Washington plays Eli, a lone traveler walking west across the wasteland. He has been walking for thirty years. In his pack is a book: the last remaining Bible on earth. After the war, people blamed it for the destruction and burned every copy they could find. Eli says a voice told him to carry this one west to a place where it would be safe, and promised he would be protected on the way.

In a ramshackle town, Eli runs into Carnegie, played by Gary Oldman, a warlord who has been sending men to search for that exact book. Carnegie doesn't believe a word of it. He wants it because he knows what its words can do to people. With that book, he says, he could control the desperate and the weak. He tries everything to get Eli to give it up, including sending his own stepdaughter, Solara, to seduce him. Eli refuses. Solara ends up following him instead.

Eli is attacked again and again. Carnegie finally takes the book by force and leaves Eli shot and bleeding on the road. But when Carnegie's men break the lock, they find the pages are in Braille. Eli has been blind the whole time. He walked thirty years by faith, not by sight.

Eli and Solara reach an old prison on Alcatraz Island, where a small group is trying to preserve what is left of human knowledge. Wounded and dying, Eli sits down and recites the entire Bible from memory while the keeper of the sanctuary writes it down. The words Carnegie stole were never only in the book. They were hidden in Eli's heart. Before he dies, the presses begin printing new copies. Solara takes Eli's pack and heads back out onto the road.

The film is very violent, and its theology is loose; the voice Eli follows and the Bible on the shelf beside other holy books are not the gospel's full picture. But as a parable, Eli is a picture of a believer sent into the most hostile world imaginable to carry the Word of God to people starving for it, and paying for it every step of the way. Amos warned of a day like Eli's: "I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread or water but of hearing the words of the LORD" (Amos 8:11).

Notice the two men who want the book. Carnegie wants the Word as a weapon, a tool for power over people. Eli carries it as a trust, for the sake of people he'll never meet. This isn't about politics or power. It's about presence. The same Bible can be wielded to control or carried to serve, and the difference is the heart of the one holding it.

And notice where the Word finally lived. "I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11). Carnegie stole the pages and got nothing he could read. Eli lost the book and still had every word. Late in the film, Eli admits to Solara that he spent so long protecting the book that he almost

forgot to live by what it says. “Don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says” (James 1:22).

We live in a world full of Bibles and starving for the Word. God is still sending ordinary people into hostile places to carry it. Hide it in your heart, live it on the road, and keep walking west.

NOTES

PARABLE 38

Discernment Drill

The Book of Eli

1. **Observe.** What was Eli carrying, where was he taking it, and why?
What did Carnegie want it for?

2. **Examine.** What did Carnegie get when he finally took the book?
Where were the words all along? What did Eli admit to Solara near the end?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Carnegie wanted the Bible too. What made his desire for it “almost right”?

4. **Look at your own life.** Where is God sending you to carry His Word into a place that’s starving for it? How much of it is hidden in your heart?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement Repentance Revival Reformation
Recalculate Revolution Release Reward Repeat

The Book of Eli

Season 6: Revolution · Driven by Eternity

The deciding question: Is the person being sent into a hard place to represent the Kingdom, at real cost?

Yes. Eli is sent across a hostile wasteland to carry the Word of God to a world starving for it, and it costs him thirty years, his safety and finally his life.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: sending you into your sphere to represent His Kingdom.** Eli follows a call west through enemy country, and the Word he carries reaches a people who have lost it.
- **The sign: you are being sent into a place where faith is costly.** Every town and every road is hostile, and the book makes him a target. He walks it blind, by faith.
- **The counterfeit: a performance instead of a calling.** Carnegie wants the Word for power. Eli carries it as a trust. The Revolution page puts it plainly: “This isn’t about politics or power. It’s about presence.”

Almost right: Whoever holds the Book holds the power.

Right: Whoever carries the Word carries it for others.

Why not Repeat?

The Word is passed on at the end, printed for the next generation, and Solara picks up Eli’s pack, so Repeat is a fair guess. But the story isn’t built around a relationship between generations. It’s built around a long, dangerous journey into hostile ground with the Word. When the story turns on being sent at great cost, it’s Revolution.

Put it into practice

Choose one passage this week and hide it in your heart: memorize it. Then look for one person in a hard place around you, and share it with them.

About Time

The Gift That Kept Him from Being There

In *About Time* (2013), a shy young man named Tim Lake learns a family secret from his father: the men in their family can travel back to moments they have already lived. Go into a dark cupboard, clench your fists, think of the moment, and you're there. His father warns him not to use it for money or fame. Tim decides to use it for love.

At first, the gift is wonderful. Tim meets Mary, and every time he says the wrong thing, he simply goes back and tries again. When a friend's play is ruined, he fixes it. When things go badly, he rewinds. He marries Mary. They have a daughter.

But the gift has limits. When his sister's life falls apart after a car crash, Tim goes back and changes her past to save her. When he returns, his daughter has been replaced by a son he has never met. He learns that he can't fix everything, and that some things can only be walked through, not rewritten. So he lets the crash happen, and stays beside his sister as she faces her life.

Then his father gets cancer that no time travel can undo. Before he dies, his father shares his secret for happiness: live each day twice. The first time, with all its worries and rush. The second time, notice how good it all is. In the end, Tim takes it one step further. He stops traveling altogether. He decides to live each day once, fully present, as if he had come back on purpose to enjoy it.

As a parable, *About Time* shows a quiet danger in every gift God gives. Tim's gift was real and good, and it arrived almost overnight. But it became a way to never be fully present. Why sit in the awkward moment when you can redo it? And when your gift can cover for you, it's easy never to grow in patience, humility or self-control.

Most of us who serve God have a version of this. The anointing becomes a substitute for character. The talent fixes the sermon, the performance, the meeting, and no one notices the person has stopped being present to God, to their marriage, to their children. Samson was the most gifted man of his generation, yet he had no self-control, and one day "he didn't realize the LORD had left him" (Judges 16:20).

Paul put gifts in their place: "If I had the gift of prophecy... and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). The fruit of the Spirit ends with a quiet word: "self-control" (Galatians 5:23). The anointing is a gift; authority comes from relationship.

When Martha was busy serving and her sister Mary simply sat at Jesus' feet, He said, "There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it" (Luke 10:42). Presence over performance.

Gifts are not godliness. Character has to carry the gift.

PARABLE 39

Discernment Drill

About Time

1. **Observe.** What could Tim do, and what did he use it for at first? What did he learn when he tried to fix his sister's past?

2. **Examine.** What was the gift quietly keeping Tim from learning? What does Samson's story add?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** After the tenth rewind, what would "almost right" sound like in Tim's head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a gift or strength you lean on so you don't have to grow, or don't have to be present?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

About Time

Season 8: Reward · Surviving the Anointing

The deciding question: Is the test coming from blessing, success or power that has already arrived?

Yes. Tim is handed a remarkable gift almost overnight. The test is whether the gift will carry his character or replace it.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: testing your character with blessing.** The gift was good. The question was what Tim would let it do to him: grow him, or excuse him from growing.
- **The sign: prayers answered faster than your character can keep up.** Every awkward moment could be redone. Tim never had to learn patience, humility or self-control. Samson had the same problem with a bigger gift.
- **The counterfeit: treating blessing as proof of approval.** A gift that keeps working feels like God's approval. Samson kept winning until the day "he didn't realize the LORD had left him." Gifts are not godliness.

Almost right: My gift can cover for me.

Right: My gift serves my life with God. It never replaces it.

Why not Release?

Tim gives up his gift at the end, so Release is a fair guess. But Release is decided by something good that has finished its season. Tim's gift hadn't finished anything. The story is about what the gift was doing to his character all along, and laying it down is how he passes the test. When the question is whether your gift is serving your character or replacing it, it's Reward.

Put it into practice

Pick one ordinary day this week and live it twice in your heart: once as it comes, and once at the end of the day, thanking God for what you would have missed.

Spider-Man: Brand New Day

The Girl on the Park Bench

In *Spider-Man: Brand New Day* (2026), four years have passed since the world forgot who Peter Parker is. He protects New York anonymously, alone. Then a new threat appears: Jean Grey, played by Sadie Sink, a teenage telepath who can jump into other people's minds and control them. She tears through the city, attacking the facilities of the Department of Damage Control.

Jean isn't simply a villain. She is a grieving sister. Years ago, agents took her sister, Sara, in broad daylight. Jean has been hunting for her ever since, ready to tear down anyone and anything in her way. Then she finds the truth. In one of the agency's rooms, she sees a chipped label on a ceiling vent and realizes it was the last thing her sister ever saw. Sara is gone.

Peter could fight her with his fists. Instead, he takes off the device protecting his mind and lets her in. Inside his memories, Jean meets his Aunt May, the woman who loved Peter for who he was, not for what he could do. Peter tells Jean that neither of them has to do this alone. Moments later, when a gunman fires at Jean, Peter throws himself in front of the bullet. And Jean, the girl who had come to destroy, uses her power to keep him alive.

The film ends quietly. Jean goes back to the park bench where she last sat with her sister. Then she gets on a bus and leaves the city.

As a parable, Jean's story is about the hardest kind of letting go: releasing a loss, and the revenge that grows out of it. Her love for her sister was good. Her grief was right. The wrong done to Sara was real. But Sara's time was over, and the need to make someone pay was turning Jean into the very thing that had wounded her. Grief that is never released can harden into a mission of destruction.

“Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, ‘I will take revenge; I will pay them back,’ says the LORD” (Romans 12:19). God doesn't ask us to pretend the wrong never happened. He asks us to hand the scales to Him. “Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many” (Hebrews 12:15).

Wanting justice is not wrong. God loves justice. But some of us carry a loss we have quietly turned into a cause. We say we want justice, but underneath, we want someone to hurt the way we hurt. Jesus offers something better. “God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). Mourning is allowed. Revenge is not ours to carry.

Notice what finally reached Jean. It wasn't a stronger punch. It was someone who opened his life to her, showed her love, and took a bullet for her. That is the gospel. Someone took the blow for us while we were still His enemies.

Sit on the bench as long as you need to. Grieve honestly. And when God says it's time, get on the bus. There is a new day on the other side of revenge.

PARABLE 40

Discernment Drill

Spider-Man: Brand New Day

1. **Observe.** What did Jean lose, and what did her grief turn into? Where did she go at the very end, and what did she do next?

2. **Examine.** Which parts of what Jean felt were right, and which part was destroying her? What finally reached her?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** After she learns the truth about Sara, what would “almost right” sound like in Jean’s head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a loss you’ve turned into a cause? Who are you still waiting to see pay?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Spider-Man: Brand New Day

Season 7: Release · Divine Pruning

The deciding question: Is the person being asked to let go of something good that has finished its season?

Yes. Jean's love for her sister is good, and Sara's life has ended. Jean has to let go of the loss and the revenge she built on it, and the story ends with a bench and a bus.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: cutting away what has finished its season.** Sara is gone, and no amount of destruction can bring her back. When Jean lets go, the girl who came to destroy uses her power to save a life. That is fruit after pruning.
- **The sign: you are still mourning a Saul God has already set aside.** Jean's whole life had become a hunt for someone who was already gone. The bench is where she finally says goodbye.
- **The counterfeit: holding on to what has finished.** Her refusal to release the loss turned grief into a rampage. Release is not losing what you love; it is letting go of what is slowly killing you.

Almost right: I'll let go once someone pays for what they did.

Right: I'll grieve what I lost and leave the scales in God's hands.

Why not Repentance?

Jean has to turn away from a destructive path, so Repentance is a fair guess. But Repentance is decided by a sin or a lie that must be turned from to come home to the Father, and the root of this story is a loss. The revenge grows out of the loss, and both have to be let go. When the story turns on opening your hands to what has ended, it's Release.

Put it into practice

Name one person you are still waiting to see pay. This week, tell God honestly how much it hurt, and then hand Him the scales.

Power, Money & Sex

How Success Almost Ruined Him

In 1998, Deion Sanders, “Prime Time,” published a book with a title that said it all: *Power, Money & Sex: How Success Almost Ruined My Life*. Few athletes have ever had more of all three. He was one of the most gifted players of his generation, starring in the NFL and playing Major League Baseball at the same time. He had the championships, the contracts, the fame, the flash and every temptation that came with them.

And by his own account, it was empty. He grew up with a father who struggled with addiction and left the family, and a mother who held everything together. He had chased success to fill what was missing. He caught it, and it didn’t fill anything. His marriage fell apart. He has since spoken openly about how low he sank, to the point where he no longer wanted to live.

That is where God met him. With the help of pastors who spoke into his life, Deion gave his life to Christ. He wrote the book not to brag about what he had, but to warn others about what it had almost cost him. One of his plainest lines is this: “The devil don’t waste time offering you stuff you don’t want.”

As a parable, Deion’s story shows that the most dangerous season is often the one everyone else envies. The danger didn’t come while he was poor or unknown. It came at the top, after everything he had chased finally arrived. Power, money and sex are three of

the oldest tests in the world. John named them: “For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world” (1 John 2:16).

King Solomon had more of all three than anyone who ever lived. “Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure.” And his verdict? “But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind” (Ecclesiastes 2:10–11).

The same story plays out in locker rooms, boardrooms and pulpits. The platform grows. The money comes. The temptations get closer. And the person inside the success is quietly falling apart. Surviving the anointing means knowing that every one of these tests is coming, and refusing to let what you’ve been given become what you live for.

Deion’s book is a testimony that God can meet you at the bottom of the mountain you climbed. If you are there right now, you are not too far gone, and you are not alone. If you have thought about ending your life, please tell someone today: a pastor, a friend, a counselor, or a crisis line (in the U.S., call or text 988).

The devil doesn’t offer you what you don’t want. That’s why it’s a test.

PARABLE 41

Discernment Drill

Power, Money & Sex

1. **Observe.** What did success bring Deion, and what did it fail to give him? When in his life did the danger come?

2. **Examine.** What do Deion and Solomon have in common? What does Deion's book title tell you about what tested him?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** At the height of his career, what would "almost right" have sounded like in Deion's head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Which of the three, power, money or pleasure, has the strongest pull on you right now?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Power, Money & Sex

Season 8: Reward · Surviving the Anointing

The deciding question: Is the test coming from blessing, success or power that has already arrived?

Yes. Deion's crisis came at the top, after the fame, money and pleasure had all arrived. His own title names the tests.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: testing your character with blessing.** Everything Deion chased, he caught. Then the blessing revealed the hole it couldn't fill.
- **The sign: promotion, influence, money or applause has arrived.** Championships, contracts, two sports at once. The tests didn't come in the valley. They came on the mountaintop.
- **The counterfeit: treating blessing as proof of approval.** Having it all looked like having it made. As Peter Vescovi says, "In the world power is the goal; in the Kingdom power is the test." Money reveals my value system more than it reveals my significance.

Almost right: If I get everything I want, I'll finally be whole.

Right: Only God can fill what success was never meant to fill.

Why not Repentance?

Deion's story ends with him giving his life to Christ, so Repentance is an understandable guess. His conversion is real, and it's the happy ending. But the story is built around what success did to him, and its title names the three tests of blessing. When the turning point is what blessing reveals in you, it's Reward.

Put it into practice

Name which of the three tests pulls on you most. This week, set one clear guardrail around it, and tell one trusted person what it is.

The Equalizer

The Man Who Noticed

In *The Equalizer* (2014), Denzel Washington plays Robert McCall, a quiet widower who works at a big-box hardware store in Boston. No one there knows that he was once a Marine and a government operative. He keeps to himself, keeps a careful routine, and reads books late at night in an all-night diner.

But McCall notices people. At work, he helps a young coworker named Ralphie train for the security guard job he wants, believing in him when no one else does. At the diner, he befriends a teenage girl who calls herself Teri. She is being trafficked by a violent gang. Over late-night conversations, she tells him her real name is Alina, and that she dreams of being a singer. McCall talks with her about books and about her future, and he treats her like she is worth something.

When Alina's pimp beats her and she ends up in the hospital, McCall goes to buy her freedom. When that fails, he takes on the whole criminal syndicate behind her. The film is a violent action thriller, and McCall's methods are no picture of God's way. But in the end, Alina wakes up in the hospital with money left by her bed, enough to start a new life. Ralphie gets his chance. And McCall begins answering requests for help from strangers who have no one else.

As a parable, the heart of *The Equalizer* isn't the fighting. It's the noticing. McCall had every reason to keep his head down. He was grieving, done with his old life, and minding his own business. His generation's fight was over. But he couldn't walk past a young man who needed someone to believe in him, or a girl who had been used and thrown away. An older man looked at two young people the world had written off and decided to be, in his own quiet way, the father they didn't have.

That is what the Kingdom asks of every generation. "Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you" (James 1:27). Paul told Titus, "Encourage the young men to live wisely. And you yourself must be an example to them by doing good works of every kind" (Titus 2:6–7).

Many of us, and many churches, walk right past the Ralphies and the Alinas. We sit in the same diner and never ask their name. Spiritual fathers and mothers aren't made by titles. They are made by paying attention, showing up, and refusing to let a young person believe the lie that they are worth nothing. I'm living for a generation I may never see.

You don't need McCall's skills. You need his eyes. Somebody near you is waiting to be noticed.

PARABLE 42

Discernment Drill

The Equalizer

1. **Observe.** Who did McCall notice, and what did he do for each of them? What reasons did he have to keep his head down?

2. **Examine.** What do Ralphie and Alina have in common? What did McCall give them that no one else had?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** What would “almost right” sound like in an older believer who says, “I’ve done my time”?

4. **Look at your own life.** Who is the Ralphie or the Alina in your world, the young person you see often but have never really noticed?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this parable illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

The Equalizer

Season 9: Repeat • Break the Cycle

The deciding question: Is God fathering you so you can give the next generation the care and discipleship you needed?

Yes. An older man who could have retired from caring pours belief, time and a future into two young people the world had written off.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: making you a father or mother to the next generation.** McCall trained Ralphie and believed in Alina's future. He became, quietly, the father they didn't have.
- **The sign: someone younger is watching how you live.** Ralphie watched McCall's discipline and started to believe he could change. Alina watched an older man treat her with dignity and started to talk about a future. They learned from what he did before anything he said.
- **The counterfeit: repeating what was done to you because it's familiar.** McCall was a grieving man who had been shaped by a hard, violent life. The familiar thing would have been to withdraw, or to pass on only hardness. He passed on belief and a future instead. In Repeat, the question is whether you pass on the wound or the blessing.

Almost right: I've done my part; let someone else step in.

Right: If God let me see them, He may be sending me.

Why not Revolution?

McCall goes into dark places to fight for others, so Revolution is a reasonable guess. But the battles aren't the heart of the story, and the parable says so. The relationships are: an older man noticing the young and giving them a future. When the story turns on what one generation gives the next, it's Repeat.

Put it into practice

Learn the name and the dream of one young person you see regularly but don't really know. Then find one way this week to tell them you believe in them.

PART THREE

Straight from Scripture

*No more movies. Nine stories from the Bible itself.
Same drill, same Debrief. The Word was always the
final training ground.*

SCRIPTURE DRILL 1

Balaam's Donkey

The Angel in the Road

Read Numbers 22.

Balaam was a prophet for hire, and the king of Moab wanted to hire him. Israel was camped on Moab's border, and King Balak was terrified. So he sent officials with money to pay Balaam to come and curse them.

Balaam asked God, and God's answer was plain: "Do not go with them. You are not to curse these people, for they have been blessed!" (Numbers 22:12). Balaam sent the men home. But Balak sent more officials, more important ones, with a bigger offer. And Balaam, instead of standing on what God had already said, asked again. God let him go, but warned him, "Do only what I tell you to do" (22:20). Balaam saddled his donkey the next morning and set out with a heart already leaning toward the reward.

"But God was angry that Balaam was going, so he sent the angel of the LORD to stand in the road to block his way" (22:22). The donkey saw the angel with a drawn sword. Balaam didn't. The donkey turned off into a field, and Balaam beat her. On a narrow path between vineyard walls, she pressed against a wall and crushed his foot, and he beat her again. In a spot too narrow to turn, she lay down under him, and he beat her a third time.

Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth: "What have I done to you that deserves your beating me three times?" (22:28). Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel standing in the road. "Look, I have come to block your way because you are stubbornly resisting me" (22:32).

Balaam fell on his face. "I have sinned. I didn't realize you were standing in the road to block my way" (22:34).

NOTES

SCRIPTURE DRILL 1

Discernment Drill

Balaam's Donkey

1. **Observe.** What did God tell Balaam the first time? What changed the second time the officials came, and what did Balaam do?

2. **Examine.** What was pulling Balaam down that road? What did the donkey see that he couldn't, and how did he respond to her three times?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Each time the donkey stopped, Balaam blamed the donkey. What would “almost right” sound like in his head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a “donkey” in your life, a closed door, a delay, a friend who keeps stopping you, that you’ve been beating instead of listening to?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this story illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Balaam's Donkey

Season 5: Recalculate · Why Revival Tarries

The deciding question: Is God correcting a direction chosen through self-reliance or missing what He is saying?

Yes. Balaam's desire for the reward put him on the road, and God literally stands in it to block his way.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: rerouting you when your plan overrules His.** God had already spoken. Balaam's plan, hoping for Balak's money, kept asking. The angel in the road is God's merciful reroute.
- **The sign: you are trusting a voice other than God's.** Balak's offer grew louder than God's first word. Balaam went back to God hoping for a different answer.
- **The counterfeit: mislabeling the wilderness.** Balaam beat the donkey three times for the very thing that was saving his life. Recalculate's counterfeit calls God's roadblock the problem.

Almost right: Something keeps getting in my way.

Right: Someone keeps getting in my way, because He loves me.

Why not Repentance?

Balaam says, "I have sinned," so Repentance is a fair guess. But the story is built around a road, a roadblock and a man being turned around. His confession comes when he finally sees why the road was blocked. When the story turns on God blocking the wrong road, it's Recalculate.

Put it into practice

Name one door that keeps closing or one delay you've been fighting. This week, stop pushing for a day, and ask God plainly whether He is the one standing in the road.

SCRIPTURE DRILL 2

Zacchaeus

Come Down

Read Luke 19:1–10.

Zacchaeus “was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich” (Luke 19:2). In Jericho everyone knew how. Tax collectors worked for Rome, and they made their money by charging their own people more than Rome required and keeping the difference. To his neighbors, Zacchaeus was a traitor and a thief.

When Jesus came through town, Zacchaeus wanted to see Him. “He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd” (19:3). The crowd wasn’t going to make room for him. So the richest man in town ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree like a boy.

“When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. ‘Zacchaeus!’ he said. ‘Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today’” (19:5).

Of all the houses in Jericho, Jesus chose his. The crowd was furious. “He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner” (19:7). But something happened to Zacchaeus at that table. Jesus never lectured him about his taxes. He just came in. And Zacchaeus stood up and said, “I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord,

and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!” (19:8).

Jesus answered, “Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost” (19:9–10).

SCRIPTURE DRILL 2

Discernment Drill

Zacchaeus

1. **Observe.** How had Zacchaeus become rich? What did he do to see Jesus, and what did Jesus do when He saw him?

2. **Examine.** Jesus never told Zacchaeus to pay anyone back. Why did he offer to? What did Jesus call him at the end?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Imagine Zacchaeus feeling terrible about his past but keeping the money. What would that sound like?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there something you've taken, from God or from people, that kindness is calling you to give back?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this story illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Zacchaeus

Season 2: Repentance · Orphans No More

The deciding question: Is the person turning from sin or a lie about themselves to agree with God's truth?

Yes. Zacchaeus's sin is greed and theft. Jesus' kindness reaches him, he turns, and Jesus calls him "a true son of Abraham."

The evidence

- **What God is doing: bringing you home as a son or daughter.** "Salvation has come to this home today." A man everyone called a traitor is named a son.
- **The sign: God is exposing a lie you have believed.** Zacchaeus had lived as if money could make up for belonging. One meal with Jesus exposed it, and he gave half of it away.
- **The counterfeit: sorry without change.** Zacchaeus doesn't just feel bad. He pays back four times over. Repentance changes the mind, and the wallet follows.

Almost right: I feel terrible about what I've done.

Right: I'm turning, and I'm making it right.

Why not Revival?

Zacchaeus is hungry to see Jesus and climbs a tree to do it, so Revival is a fair guess. But the story turns at the table, on a sin he turns from and a son brought home. When the story turns on a sinner turning around, it's Repentance.

Put it into practice

Ask God if there is one thing you need to make right with someone. This week, take the first step to do it.

SCRIPTURE DRILL 3

Paul's Thorn

Grace Is Enough

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1–10.

Paul had seen things few people ever see. He was caught up into heaven and heard things too sacred to put into words. If anyone had a reason to think highly of himself, it was Paul.

Then something else came with the revelations. “So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud” (2 Corinthians 12:7). Paul never tells us what the thorn was. A sickness, a person, a recurring trouble: we don’t know. We only know it hurt, it didn’t go away, and Satan meant it to torment him.

Paul did what any of us would do. “Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away” (12:8).

God’s answer wasn’t the one Paul asked for. “Each time he said, ‘My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness’” (12:9).

The thorn stayed. But something in Paul changed. “So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:9–10).

Paul didn't move to a new city to escape it. He wasn't being punished for a sin. He wasn't on the wrong road. He was an apostle in the middle of his calling, carrying a pain God chose not to remove, and learning a strength he could never have learned without it.

SCRIPTURE DRILL 3

Discernment Drill

Paul's Thorn

1. **Observe.** What had Paul seen, and what came with it? How many times did he ask for it to be taken away, and what did God say?

2. **Examine.** Who sent the thorn, and what did God do with it? What changed in Paul, even though the thorn stayed?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** After the third “no,” what would “almost right” sound like in Paul’s prayers?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a “thorn” you’ve asked God to remove more than once? What might He be building in you through it?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this story illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Paul's Thorn

Season 1: Refinement · Divine Training

The deciding question: Is God using pressure to train the person's character, not to punish them or turn them around?

Yes. Paul isn't being punished and isn't on the wrong road. The thorn stays, and God uses it to guard his heart and grow his strength.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: using pressure to train you, not punish you.** Satan meant the thorn to torment Paul. God used it to keep him from pride and to teach him that "my power works best in weakness."
- **The sign: prayers seem to go unanswered.** Three times Paul begged, and three times the answer was grace instead of relief.
- **The counterfeit: treating refinement as punishment, or lowering your theology to match your pain.** Paul could have decided God was against him, or that God doesn't really answer prayer. Instead he learned to boast in weakness. My crown reveals my potential, my cross shapes my character, and my thorn guards my heart.

Almost right: If God loved me, He'd take this away.

Right: His grace is enough, and His power works best in my weakness.

Why not Reward?

The thorn came because of great revelations, so Reward is a fair guess: the danger of pride after blessing. But Paul isn't failing a test of blessing here. The story turns on the thorn itself and what God builds through it. When the story turns on pressure that trains, it's Refinement.

Put it into practice

Write down the "thorn" you've prayed about most. This week, add one line to that prayer each day: "Your grace is enough for me today."

Hezekiah and the Bronze Serpent

When God's Gift Becomes an Idol

Read Numbers 21:4–9 and 2 Kings 18:1–6.

In the wilderness, the people of Israel complained against God, and poisonous snakes came into the camp. Many were bitten and died. When the people cried out, God gave Moses a strange command: “Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to a pole. All who are bitten will live if they simply look at it!” (Numbers 21:8). Moses made a snake out of bronze, and everyone who looked at it was healed. Centuries later, Jesus pointed to that very pole as a picture of His cross (John 3:14).

The bronze serpent was God’s idea. It was a real instrument of real healing. And Israel kept it.

About seven hundred years later, Hezekiah became king of Judah. “He did what was pleasing in the LORD’s sight, just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the pagan shrines, smashed the sacred pillars, and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke up the bronze serpent that Moses had made, because the people of Israel had been offering sacrifices to it. The bronze serpent was called Nehushtan” (2 Kings 18:3–4).

Somewhere along the way, the people had started burning incense to the very thing God once used to heal them. The object had outlived its purpose and become an idol, and it had a name.

Hezekiah broke it to pieces. “He remained faithful to the LORD in everything, and he carefully obeyed all the commands the LORD had given Moses” (18:6).

It took courage. Hezekiah wasn’t tearing down a foreign idol. He was tearing down a holy relic from the days of Moses, something people had treasured for generations.

SCRIPTURE DRILL 4

Discernment Drill

Hezekiah and the Bronze Serpent

1. **Observe.** Where did the bronze serpent come from, and what was it for? What had the people started doing with it by Hezekiah's time?

2. **Examine.** Why would breaking it take courage? What did Hezekiah measure the people's worship by?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** What would "almost right" sound like in someone who defends Nehushtan?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there something God once used powerfully in your life, a method, a place, a tradition, that you've started trusting more than Him?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this story illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

Hezekiah and the Bronze Serpent

Season 4: Reformation · Restoring the House

The deciding question: Is something in God’s house being corrected and rebuilt on His Word?

Yes. A tradition that had replaced true worship is broken, and Hezekiah brings the nation back to “all the commands the LORD had given Moses.”

The evidence

- **What God is doing: rebuilding your life and church on His Word.**
Hezekiah didn’t invent a new religion. He measured the people’s worship by what God had commanded and removed what didn’t belong.
- **The sign: Scripture exposing traditions that have replaced truth.**
Nehushtan started as God’s instrument and became a tradition people worshiped. Even holy things can replace the Holy One.
- **The counterfeit: deconstruction without reconstruction.** Hezekiah didn’t just smash things. He “trusted in the LORD” and “carefully obeyed” His commands. The tearing down served the rebuilding.

Almost right: God used it before, so it must be holy.

Right: God is holy. What He used is only a tool.

Why not Release?

The bronze serpent was good and had finished its purpose, so Release is a strong guess. But Release is about a person opening their hands. This story is about a nation’s worship being corrected by the Word, a king tearing down a tradition that had become an idol. When the story turns on restoring true worship in God’s house, it’s Reformation.

Put it into practice

Name one good tool God has used in your life, a church practice, a devotional habit, a ministry method. This week, ask Him whether you’ve started trusting it more than Him, and put Him back at the center.

SCRIPTURE DRILL 5

Samuel and Saul

You Have Mourned Long Enough

Read 1 Samuel 15:10–16:13.

Samuel had anointed Saul as Israel's first king. He had poured oil on his head, kissed him, and watched God's Spirit come on him. For years Samuel had prayed for him, corrected him and stood beside him.

But Saul kept disobeying God. After he refused God's command in the battle against the Amalekites, God said, "I am sorry that I ever made Saul king, for he has not been loyal to me and has refused to obey my command." The Bible says "Samuel was so deeply moved when he heard this that he cried out to the LORD all night" (1 Samuel 15:11).

Samuel delivered God's verdict to Saul: "Because you have rejected the command of the LORD, he has rejected you as king" (15:23). Then the two men parted. "Samuel never went to meet with Saul again, but he mourned constantly for him" (15:35).

Samuel's grief was real, and it was right. He loved the man. But Saul's season was over, and Samuel was still standing at the grave.

"Now the LORD said to Samuel, 'You have mourned long enough for Saul. I have rejected him as king of Israel'" (16:1). God sent him to Bethlehem, to the house of a man named Jesse. Samuel looked at Jesse's oldest son and was sure he'd found the next king.

God said, “People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (16:7). Seven sons passed by. Then they brought in the youngest, a shepherd boy from the field. “This is the one; anoint him” (16:12).

Samuel poured the oil on David’s head, “and the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David from that day on” (16:13). The future was waiting in Bethlehem, but Samuel had to stop mourning to go and find it.

SCRIPTURE DRILL 5

Discernment Drill

Samuel and Saul

1. **Observe.** What had Samuel invested in Saul? What did Samuel do after he and Saul parted?

2. **Examine.** Was Samuel's grief wrong? What did God tell him, and what was waiting for him in Bethlehem?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Months after the final break with Saul, what would "almost right" sound like in Samuel's prayers?

4. **Look at your own life.** Is there a person, a role or a ministry God has set aside that you're still mourning? What might be waiting in your Bethlehem?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this story illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

Samuel and Saul

Season 7: Release · Divine Pruning

The deciding question: Is the person being asked to let go of something good that has finished its season?

Yes. Saul was God's own choice, anointed by Samuel's hands, and Samuel loved him. His season was over, and God tells Samuel to stop mourning and move on.

The evidence

What God is doing: cutting away what has finished its season. God rejected Saul as king and sent Samuel to anoint David. The pruning made room for a king after God's own heart.

The sign: you are still mourning a Saul God has already set aside. The Release page uses this very story. "You have mourned long enough for Saul." It's hard to anoint the David in your life if you're still mourning your Saul.

The counterfeit: allowing mourning to keep you from obeying. Sorrow itself is not disobedience. But if Samuel had continued mourning instead of responding to God's instruction, he would have missed his divine assignment in that season. He could still grieve Saul and go to Bethlehem.

Almost right: If I stop grieving, it means I never really cared.

Right: I can grieve what God has ended and still go where He's sending me next.

Why not Repeat?

Samuel goes on to anoint the next king, and an older prophet raising up a younger leader sounds like Repeat. But the story doesn't turn on what Samuel passes to David. It turns on God's words "You have mourned long enough." When the story turns on letting go of what has ended, it's Release.

Put it into practice

Name your "Saul," the person or season you're still mourning after God has closed it. This week, thank God for what was good in it, then ask Him, "Where is my Bethlehem?"

SCRIPTURE DRILL 6

King Uzziah

When He Had Become Powerful

Read 2 Chronicles 26.

Uzziah became king of Judah at sixteen. He started well. “He did what was pleasing in the LORD’s sight.” He had a mentor, a man named Zechariah, “who taught him to fear God. And as long as the king sought guidance from the LORD, God gave him success” (2 Chronicles 26:4–5).

And God gave him a great deal of success. Uzziah won battles against the Philistines and the Arabs. He rebuilt towns, dug wells and loved the land. He built towers in Jerusalem and organized a powerful army. Engineers designed new machines for his walls to shoot arrows and hurl stones. “His fame spread far and wide, for the LORD gave him marvelous help, and he became very powerful” (26:15).

Read the next verse slowly. “But when he had become powerful, he also became proud, which led to his downfall” (26:16).

Uzziah walked into the Temple to burn incense on the altar, a holy work God had given only to the priests. Eighty brave priests followed him in and confronted him: “It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD. That is the work of the priests alone... Get out of the sanctuary, for you have sinned” (26:18).

He didn't listen. "But as he was standing there raging at the priests before the incense altar in the LORD's Temple, leprosy suddenly broke out on his forehead" (26:19). Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. "He lived in isolation in a separate house, for he was excluded from the Temple of the LORD" (26:21).

The danger never came when he was a sixteen-year-old with everything to learn. It came at the top, after God had given him everything.

SCRIPTURE DRILL 6

Discernment Drill

King Uzziah

1. **Observe.** What did Uzziah have going for him early in his reign? List what God gave him.

2. **Examine.** When did things turn? Read 26:16 again: what came right before the downfall?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Standing at the altar with the censer in his hand, what would “almost right” sound like in Uzziah’s head?

4. **Look at your own life.** Where has God given you success? Are you seeking His guidance there as much as you did when you started?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this story illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

King Uzziah

Season 8: Reward · Surviving the Anointing

The deciding question: Is the test coming from blessing, success or power that has already arrived?

Yes. “When he had become powerful, he also became proud.” The danger came after the blessing.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: testing your character with blessing.** God gave Uzziah “marvelous help,” victories, fame and power. Then the blessing revealed what was in his heart.
- **The sign: promotion, influence, money or applause has arrived.** Victories, towers, an army and fame that “spread far and wide.” Uzziah’s crisis came at the top, not at the start.
- **The counterfeit: treating blessing as proof of approval.** Uzziah decided his success put him above God’s order. Sometimes success is not the reward; sometimes success is the test.

Almost right: God has blessed everything I’ve done, so I can do this too.

Right: God’s blessing is a trust, not a license.

Why not Refinement?

Uzziah ends his life with leprosy and in isolation, so Refinement might come to mind. But Refinement is God using pressure to train character. Uzziah’s leprosy is a judgment after a failed test, and the story turns on what power did to him. When the turning point comes after blessing arrives, it’s Reward.

Put it into practice

Name one area where God has blessed you. This week, ask one trusted person to tell you honestly if they’ve seen pride creep in there, and listen without defending yourself.

SCRIPTURE DRILL 7

The Fiery Furnace

Even If He Doesn't

Read Daniel 3.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were young Jewish exiles serving in the government of Babylon, the empire that had destroyed their city and carried them away. They hadn't chosen Babylon. God had placed them there, and they served it well.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar built a gold statue ninety feet tall and ordered every official in the empire to bow down to it when the music played. Anyone who refused would be thrown into a blazing furnace. The music played, and the whole crowd went down on their faces. Three men stayed on their feet.

Nebuchadnezzar was furious, but he gave them one more chance. Their answer is one of the bravest sentences in the Bible: "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).

The king had the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual. It was so hot that the soldiers who threw them in were killed by the flames. Then Nebuchadnezzar looked into the fire and jumped to

his feet. “I see four men, unbound, walking around in the fire unharmed! And the fourth looks like a god!” (3:25).

When the three came out, “not a hair on their heads was singed, and their clothing was not scorched” (3:27). And the most powerful king on earth said, “Praise to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! He sent his angel to rescue his servants who trusted in him” (3:28).

SCRIPTURE DRILL 7

Discernment Drill

The Fiery Furnace

1. **Observe.** How did these three men end up in Babylon, and what were they doing there? What did the king command, and what did they do?

2. **Examine.** What did they say God could do, and what did they say they would do if He didn't? Who did they find in the fire?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** There were two easy ways out before the furnace: one was quitting Babylon, the other was bowing just once. What would each sound like?

4. **Look at your own life.** Where is the “music playing” in your world, the moment everyone bows and you’re asked to bow too?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this story illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

The Fiery Furnace

Season 6: Revolution · Driven by Eternity

The deciding question: Is the person being sent into a hard place to represent the Kingdom, at real cost?

Yes. Three exiles serve faithfully in Babylon and refuse to bow, knowing the furnace is waiting.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: sending you into your sphere to represent His Kingdom.** Babylon wasn't their failure; it was their assignment. By the end, the king of Babylon is praising their God.
- **The sign: you are called to stand faithful when the miracle hasn't come.** "But even if he doesn't." They made their stand before they knew how it would end.
- **The counterfeit: a performance instead of a calling.** A performer bows when the crowd bows. These three stood alone, with nothing to gain but faithfulness. This isn't about politics or power. It's about presence: the fourth man in the fire.

Almost right: God will save me, so I'll stand.

Right: Even if He doesn't, I'll stand.

Why not Refinement?

There is literal fire in this story, so Refinement is a natural guess. But the furnace isn't God's training tool here. It's the price of standing for the Kingdom in a hostile empire. When the story turns on faithfulness in the place you've been sent, it's Revolution.

Put it into practice

Name one "statue" people around you expect you to bow to. This week, decide ahead of time how you'll stand when the music plays, and pray for the courage to say "even if He doesn't."

Mary's Perfume

The House Was Filled with the Fragrance

Read John 12:1–8.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, to the home of Lazarus, the man He had raised from the dead. “A dinner was prepared in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, and Lazarus was among those who ate with him” (John 12:2).

Then Lazarus’s sister Mary did something no one expected. She “took a twelve-ounce jar of expensive perfume made from essence of nard, and she anointed Jesus’ feet with it, wiping his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance” (12:3).

Judas objected right away. “That perfume was worth a year’s wages. It should have been sold and the money given to the poor” (12:5). It sounded responsible. It even sounded compassionate. But John tells us the truth: “Not that he cared for the poor—he was a thief, and since he was in charge of the disciples’ money, he often stole some for himself” (12:6).

Jesus defended her. “Leave her alone. She did this in preparation for my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me” (12:7–8).

A year’s wages, poured out in a moment. Her hair, her dignity, her savings, all at His feet. Mary had been here before. When Jesus first visited her home, she sat at His feet listening while Martha

worked, and Jesus said she had discovered “the one thing worth being concerned about” (Luke 10:42). Mary wasn’t trying to accomplish anything. She just wanted Him, and she didn’t care what it cost.

SCRIPTURE DRILL 8

Discernment Drill

Mary's Perfume

1. **Observe.** What did Mary pour out, and how much was it worth? What did Judas say, and what was really going on with him?

2. **Examine.** What was Mary trying to get from Jesus? What did Jesus say about what she had done?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** Judas's objection sounded spiritual. What made it "almost right"?

4. **Look at your own life.** What would it cost you to pour out something precious at His feet this week? What holds you back?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this story illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement

Repentance

Revival

Reformation

Recalculate

Revolution

Release

Reward

Repeat

Mary's Perfume

Season 3: Revival · The Cost of Discipleship

The deciding question: Is God's presence awakening the person to their true identity in Him and a hunger for more of Him?

Yes. Mary wants Jesus Himself, not anything from Him, and her hunger costs her a year's wages.

The evidence

- **What God is doing: drawing you into His presence.** Mary isn't serving, asking or performing. She is at His feet, and "the house was filled with the fragrance."
- **The sign: a fresh hunger for God's presence, more than His gifts.** Mary had already seen her brother raised from the dead. What she wanted now was Jesus, not another miracle.
- **The counterfeit: religion that sounds spiritual without hunger.** Judas used the language of compassion to cover a heart that wanted money, not Jesus. Hype and noise, even religious noise, can't replace a hungry heart.

Almost right: That could have been put to better use.

Right: Nothing poured out on Him is wasted.

Why not Release?

Mary lets go of something very valuable, so Release is a fair guess. But Release is about letting go of something that has finished its season. Mary isn't closing a chapter. She is pouring out her best on Jesus because she wants Him. When the story turns on costly hunger for His presence, it's Revival.

Put it into practice

Set aside time this week to spend with Jesus with no request and no agenda. Bring Him something costly: an hour you'd normally spend elsewhere, or a gift given in secret.

SCRIPTURE DRILL 9

Elisha's Plow

The Cloak and the Double Portion

Read 1 Kings 19:19–21 and 2 Kings 2:1–15.

“So Elijah went and found Elisha son of Shaphat plowing a field. There were twelve teams of oxen in the field, and Elisha was plowing with the twelfth team. Elijah went over to him and threw his cloak across his shoulders and then walked away” (1 Kings 19:19).

Elisha knew what the cloak meant. The old prophet was choosing a successor. “Elisha left the oxen standing there, ran after Elijah,” and asked only to say goodbye to his parents (19:20). Then he did something that left no way back. “So Elisha returned to his oxen and slaughtered them. He used the wood from the plow to build a fire to roast their flesh. He passed around the meat to the townspeople, and they all ate. Then he went with Elijah as his assistant” (19:21).

For years, Elisha served the older man. When the day came for Elijah to be taken up, Elijah tried three times to leave him behind. Each time Elisha answered, “As surely as the LORD lives and you yourself live, I will never leave you!” (2 Kings 2:2).

At the Jordan, Elijah asked, “Tell me what I can do for you before I am taken away.” Elisha answered, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit and become your successor” (2:9). Then a

chariot of fire separated them, and Elijah went up in a whirlwind. Elisha cried out, “My father! My father!” (2:12).

“Elisha picked up Elijah’s cloak, which had fallen when he was taken up” (2:13). He walked back to the Jordan, struck the water with it and cried, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” And the river divided (2:14). The prophets watching said, “Elijah’s spirit rests upon Elisha!” (2:15).

The cloak that first landed on a plowman’s shoulders in a field was now his to carry.

SCRIPTURE DRILL 9

Discernment Drill

Elisha's Plow

1. **Observe.** What was Elisha doing when Elijah found him? What did Elijah do with his cloak the first time and what happened to it at the end?

2. **Examine.** What did Elisha call Elijah when he was taken up? What did Elisha ask for, and what did he do with what he received?

3. **Expose the counterfeit.** What would “almost right” have sounded like for a young man who admired Elijah but wanted to keep his oxen?

4. **Look at your own life.** Who threw a cloak over your shoulders? Whose shoulders are you watching for?

5. **Make the call.** Circle the season this story illustrates, then write the two clues in the story that led you there.

Refinement	Repentance	Revival	Reformation	
Recalculate	Revolution	Release	Reward	Repeat

Elisha's Plow

Season 9: Repeat • Break the Cycle

The deciding question: Is God fathering you so you can give the next generation the care and discipleship you needed?

Yes. An old prophet chooses a young plowman, trains him for years, and the cloak passes from one to the other. Elisha calls him “My father!”

The evidence

- **What God is doing: making you a father or mother to the next generation.** Elijah didn’t just do ministry. He raised a son in the faith. Teachers give you a map for the wilderness. Fathers walk through it with you.
- **The sign: someone younger is watching how you live.** Elisha followed Elijah everywhere and refused to leave him. He had watched long enough to ask for a double share.
- **The counterfeit: repeating what was done to you because it’s familiar.** The familiar thing for a plowman was to stay with the oxen and let the prophets be someone else’s business. Elisha burned the plow, and the blessing passed on.

Almost right: I admire the ones who carry the cloak.

Right: I’ll walk with them until it’s mine to carry, and then pass it on.

Why not Revival?

Elisha burns his plow to follow, like Peter leaving his nets, so Revival is a fair guess. But the story doesn’t stop at the field. It follows the cloak from Elijah to Elisha and ends with the next generation carrying it. When the story turns on what is passed down, it’s Repeat.

Put it into practice

Thank the person who threw a cloak over your shoulders. Then ask God to show you one younger person to walk with this year, and make the first call this week.

CLOSING

Keep Your Lamp Burning

So you, too, must keep watch! For you do not know the day or hour of my return.

Matthew 25:13

Jesus told a parable about ten bridesmaids waiting for a bridegroom (Matthew 25:1–13). All ten were invited. All ten had lamps. All ten fell asleep while they waited. From the outside, you couldn't tell them apart.

Then the cry went out at midnight: the bridegroom is coming. Five of the bridesmaids had brought no extra oil, and their lamps were going out. They turned to the others and asked to borrow some. The answer was no: "We don't have enough for all of us. Go to a shop and buy some for yourselves" (Matthew 25:9). Not because the others were selfish, but because some things can't be borrowed. While the five were gone, the door was shut.

Five were wise. Five were almost right.

That is the whole point of this manual. You can't borrow someone else's intimacy with God. You can't borrow the character that was formed in someone else's hard season. Someone else's insight can point you in the right direction, but it can't see for you when the moment comes. Each of us has to learn to read the season with our own eyes, from our own time in the Word and in the presence of God.

You can't borrow oil, and you can't borrow discernment.

Oil is gathered in the seasons. Every season you learn from instead of merely surviving adds oil to your lamp. If you have worked through these exercises, you have been doing more than reading. You have been training your senses. You have practiced asking the deciding questions, telling refinement from recalculation and reward from release, and naming the counterfeit before it fools you. Keep practicing. The films will change and the songs will change, but the seasons of the Kingdom keep turning, and the Holy Spirit is still teaching those with ears to hear.

And if your lamp feels low tonight, don't hide from Him. Come honest. The point was never the lamp. It was the Bridegroom, and He is still the One worth waiting for.

So keep watching. Keep filling your lamp. Keep asking, in every season, "Lord, what time is it, and what would You have me do?" Then go find someone a few steps behind you and walk through their season with them.

Keep your lamp burning, and bring someone with you.