

THE MYSTERY OF
THE PAIN,
THE
CRUSHING
& DIVINE
TRAINING

The Boy Who Pushes the Plow

CHRONICLES OF A REFORMER

The Mystery of the Pain

The Crushing & Divine Training

THE BOY WHO PUSHES THE PLOW

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

— *William Tyndale*

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

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

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

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The Plowboy and the Press

I have refined you, but not as silver is refined. Rather, I have refined you in the furnace of suffering.

Isaiah 48:10

Almost five hundred years ago, a man named William Tyndale made a promise to a learned churchman who thought ordinary people didn't need to read the Bible for themselves. "If God spare my life," Tyndale said, "ere many years pass, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost."

He kept that promise, and it cost him everything. He translated the Scriptures in hiding, was betrayed, imprisoned, and finally executed in 1536. The boy behind the plow got his Bible because a man was willing to be crushed.

That's where the name on the cover comes from. I write as the boy who pushes the plow. I don't put my face or my name on these books, because I don't want you following me. I want you to open the Book and find the God who is in it.

And I'll tell you something about plows. Nothing grows until the ground is broken.

God breaks ground before He plants seed.

Why a Book About Pain

I didn't set out to write about suffering. Nobody does. But the longer I've walked with Jesus, the more I've noticed that the hardest seasons of my life were the ones where He was doing His deepest work.

I spent years playing football, from high school through college and the NFL, and my body still carries the map of it. I've known injuries that took away my ability to walk for a season. I've watched my son break his leg in his senior season and see his dreams put on hold. I've known rejection from the people I most wanted to be accepted by. And I've sat with people whose losses were far greater than mine.

In all of it, I kept running into the same question: if God is good, why does He let His children be crushed?

The Americanized gospel doesn't have a good answer, because it never expected the question. It promised a crown without a cross. It told us God's favor would look like comfort, success and ease. So when the fire came, many of us assumed God had abandoned us, or that we had done something wrong, or that the whole thing wasn't true.

Scripture tells a different story. It tells us we have a Refiner. It tells us grapes must be crushed to become wine, olives pressed to become oil, and silver heated until the Refiner sees His own reflection in it. It tells us pain is a mystery, not a malfunction. God is not the author of your pain, but He is the master of it, and nothing that passes through His hands is wasted.

This book is my attempt to tell that story.

The Season of Refinement

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

This book focuses on the season of Refinement.

Often, we have already passed through numerous different seasons without recognizing them. But it is through refining seasons that God often gets our attention. The fire awakens us to our need for Him and teaches us to recognize His work. These seasons can overlap and return; they do not follow a fixed order.

Refinement may not be our first season, but it is often the season that gets our attention.

What You'll Find Here

The book moves in six parts.

Part One, The Mystery,

asks the hard question honestly: why would a good Father let His children be crushed?

Part Two, The Crushing,

looks at what God is making out of our pain: wine from grapes, a crown, a cross and a thorn, and the long road from instant faith to enduring faith.

Part Three, The Refiner's Fire,

walks into the furnace itself. We'll look at the fires God's people will face, and learn to tell the difference between God's refining and the wilderness we create for ourselves.

Part Four, Divine Training,

is about how a Father trains His sons and daughters: the weight room, the reasons pain is worth valuing, the wilderness, and learning to lean on the Beloved.

Part Five, Job and the Courts of Heaven,

sits with the oldest story of suffering in the Bible and confronts the quiet temptation to be offended with God.

Part Six, Collateral Beauty,

shows what grows out of the ashes, and the treasures heaven keeps from every tear.

How to Read This Book

You can read this book alone, but please don't suffer alone. When the people of Malachi's day were tempted to believe that serving God was pointless, those who feared the Lord began talking with one another, and the Lord leaned in to listen (Malachi 3:16). Find a few people who will lean in with you. Read a chapter a week. At the end of every chapter there's a section called

For the Road

: three questions and one line to carry with you. Talk about them. Pray about them. Be honest.

If you're in the fire right now, I want you to know something before you turn another page. I'm not going to tell you your pain is good. Some of what you've been through was evil, and God hates it more than you do. I'm not going to rush you to the other side or hand you a slogan. But I am going to point you to a Father who sits beside the furnace, who never takes His eyes off the silver, and who has promised that the fire will not consume you.

As always, eat the chicken and throw away the bone. Test everything I say against the Word of God. I'm a son still learning, not a man who has finished the race.

You are not being destroyed. You are being refined.

PART ONE

The Mystery

Why would a good Father let His children be crushed?

Celebrity or Navy SEAL?

They strengthened the believers. They encouraged them to continue in the faith, reminding them that we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God.

Acts 14:22

There are two kinds of people the world watches closely. One kind wants to be seen. The other kind trains so they never have to be.

A celebrity is a personality made widely known through media coverage. Their life is publicly consumed as entertainment. They build a brand to make themselves powerful, popular and profitable, and the whole thing depends on being watched.

A Navy SEAL is the opposite. SEALs are hand selected, trained for years, and built for warfare. They carry out direct assaults on enemy targets, run calculated missions to report on enemy activity, and take action against people who mean harm. Most of what they do, nobody ever sees. There are no red carpets at the end of a mission. There is only the next assignment.

I believe the Church has the same two kinds of people.

A spiritual celebrity seeks recognition and attention. Personal branding and popularity matter more than real growth, because the praise of people moves their heart more than the glory of God.

A spiritual Navy SEAL doesn't need the stage, the lights or the recognition. They have counted the cost of discipleship. They face trials that lead to deeper intimacy, purification and growth, and they can endure it, because they see Jesus as their reward.

Celebrities perform in public. Navy SEALs are formed in private combat.

This book is about how God forms the second kind of person. And I need to tell you up front: the training facility is pain.

What Is God Creating?

I have refined you, but not as silver is refined. Rather, I have refined you in the furnace of suffering. I will rescue you for my sake—yes, for my own sake!

Isaiah 48:10–11

God is creating something. The question is whether we will cooperate with what He's making or keep asking Him to make something else.

Jesus was blunt about performance religion. In Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Sermon on the Mount, He warns about people "making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for stardom," and then asks a question I can't shake: "Do you think God sits in a box seat?" (Matthew 6:5, MSG).

When Jesus called the religious leaders of His day hypocrites, He used a word that came straight from the theater. In Greek, a *hypokritēs* was an actor, a stage player, someone wearing a mask for an audience. Jesus was not condemning devotion. He was confronting an orphan heart that turns a relationship with God into a pursuit of influence, approval, recognition and position.

Jesus was looking for a few good men and women. He wasn't trying to entertain a crowd. He called them to deny themselves, pick up a cross and follow Him.

If you draw people in with entertainment, you'll have to keep the circus going to keep them there.

A church that values entertainment over the cost of discipleship will make actors instead of disciples.

How Do You Expect to Be Famous?

Even Jesus had people in His life pushing Him toward the spotlight. His own brothers did it.

Jesus' brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, where your followers can see your miracles! You can't become famous if you hide like this! If you can do such wonderful things, show yourself to the world!" For even his brothers didn't believe in him.

John 7:3–5

They thought they were giving Him good career advice. Go where the crowds are. Get seen. Build the platform. Jesus refused. He was committed to something greater than

fame: obedience and complete surrender to His Father's timing.

I think about that every time I hear what I call the Americanized gospel. It tells a story centered on achieving personal dreams, happiness, health and success through ambition and drive. God becomes the sponsor of the life we designed for ourselves.

The Gospel in Scripture tells a very different story. It's the story of people who follow the Lamb wherever He goes, at any cost, even when obedience means laying their dreams, comfort, reputation and plans on the altar.

God's provision is for His vision.

His provision was never promised to finance our ambitions. It's given to accomplish His purposes through surrendered lives. Following Christ is not asking God to bless the life we've built. It's surrendering our lives so His purposes can be built through us. And very often, that surrender is forged in a furnace of pain, rejection, sacrifice and persecution.

The goal was never to become successful by the world's standards. The goal is to become faithful.

What's in It for Me?

There's a question every one of us asks, whether we say it out loud or not: "What's in it for me?" What will I gain if I commit to this? What's the benefit, the advantage, the payoff?

That question is the orphan mindset talking. An orphan has to look out for himself, because no one else will. So he approaches God the way he approaches everything else, by calculating what he'll get.

But Scripture shows us that the greatest reward God gives is not something He hands us. It's Himself.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward."

Genesis 15:1 (NKJV)

God didn't just promise Abram a reward. He told Abram He *was* the reward. John Piper put it in a sentence I have never forgotten:

“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.”

John Piper

Jesus said the same thing when He defined eternal life: “And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth” (John 17:3). Eternal life is more than an endless number of days. It’s the privilege of knowing God, seeing His character, experiencing His presence, and growing in friendship with Him forever.

Jesus is the Gospel, and He is the reward of our salvation.

Jesus once told the Pharisees, “What this world honors is detestable in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15). Think about that. I believe the reverse is usually true too: what God honors is often despised by the world. That means we have a real choice to make. Someone is going to look down on what we do with our lives, either God or people. Which one will it be?

Here’s a question to sit with before you turn the page. What is something people despise that God treasures? I’ll give you my answer: suffering for His sake.

The Promise of Pain

When Jesus called Saul of Tarsus, He sent a disciple named Ananias to pray for him. Ananias was nervous, because Saul had a reputation for arresting believers. Listen to how the Lord answered him:

But the Lord said, “Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake.”

Acts 9:15–16

Paul’s introduction to the gospel was not a promise of personal dreams, prosperity or platform. It was a promise of pain. That’s not because the gospel isn’t good news. It’s because anything worth having, especially God Himself, is worth laying down your life for. Paul later called everything else garbage compared to knowing Christ (Philippians 3:8). The Pearl of Great Price is worth selling everything.

Years later, Paul and Barnabas went back through the cities where they had planted churches. They didn’t promise those young believers an easy road. They told them the truth: “we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

Jesus Himself never hid the cost. He often seemed to try to talk people *out* of following Him, because so many never grasp what discipleship costs. We love to emphasize the promises and blessings of following Jesus, and we should. But when we leave out the cost, we send new believers onto the battlefield without telling them there's a war.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me."

Matthew 16:24

The symbol of our faith is not a weapon of protection or a sign of prosperity. It's an instrument of execution.

That's why so many believers are confused when they feel abandoned or crushed. Following Christ doesn't lack good gifts, hope and abundance. But His ways include pruning, persecution and crushing, and there is no resurrection without a death. We have to embrace His ways instead of personal expectations He never promised to fulfill.

The cross was never a decoration. It was an execution, and it was the doorway to resurrection.

Luther's Three Rules

Martin Luther once described what it takes to become a real theologian, someone who actually knows God and not just facts about Him. He named three things, in Latin: *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*.

1. **Prayer.** Daily conversation with God, the way the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1).
2. **Meditation on God's Word.** Delighting in His law and thinking about it day and night, like the blessed man of Psalm 1.
3. **Trial.** Affliction. Suffering.

Most of us would gladly sign up for the first two. It's the third one we try to skip. But Luther understood what the psalmist learned the hard way:

I used to wander off until you disciplined me; but now I closely follow your word.

Psalms 119:67

A few verses later the psalmist says it even more plainly: “My suffering was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees” (Psalm 119:71).

You can learn a lot about God in a classroom. But some things about Him you will only learn in the furnace.

Prayer and the Word teach you about God. Suffering teaches you to trust Him.

What You Introduce People With

Think about Easter Sunday. Many churches treat it like the Super Bowl of the Christian calendar. Attendance swells, the production gets bigger, and there’s a strong temptation to avoid saying anything challenging that might keep visitors from coming back.

I wonder what Jesus would preach on a Sunday like that. He once had a crowd of thousands following Him after He fed them bread and fish. So He told them, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have eternal life within you” (John 6:53). It was the hardest saying of His ministry.

At this point many of his disciples turned away and deserted him. Then Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, “Are you also going to leave?”

John 6:66–67

Jesus let them walk away. He would rather have twelve who would follow Him to the cross than thousands who came for lunch.

Here’s a principle I’ve come to believe deeply.

What you introduce people to Christianity with will be the very thing they need to endure in Christianity.

If someone was drawn in by prosperity, they’ll get offended when they don’t prosper. If they were drawn in by entertainment, they’ll be tempted to leave when they’re not entertained. But if they were introduced to Jesus Himself, and told the truth about the cost, they’ll have a reason to stay when the fire comes.

The Christianity I was introduced to growing up taught me to be good, not dangerous. It taught me to survive, not thrive. It was more about shielding myself from the dangers of the world than releasing the Kingdom of God into it. I don’t say that to throw stones. I say it because I’ve lived on both sides, and I know which one can stand in the furnace.

In the series of books I've been writing, I talk about the nine seasons of the Kingdom of God: Refinement, Repentance, Revival, Reformation, Recalculate, Revolution, Release, Reward and Repeat. This book lives in the first one. Refinement is where God takes celebrities and turns them into Navy SEALs. It's where the crushing happens, where the training happens, and where, if we'll let Him, God becomes our reward.

So before we go any further, let me ask you the question this whole book is built on. Are you looking for a God who will make you comfortable? Or are you willing to be trained by a Father who loves you too much to leave you the way you are?

For the Road

1. Look honestly at your walk with God. In what ways have you been living more like a spiritual celebrity than a spiritual Navy SEAL?
2. What were you "introduced" to Christianity with? How has that shaped the way you respond when following Jesus gets hard?
3. Luther named prayer, the Word and trial. Which of the three have you been trying to skip, and what might God want to teach you there?

God isn't building an audience. He's training an army, and He Himself is the reward.

The Mystery of the Crushing

But it was the LORD's good plan to crush him and cause him grief.

Isaiah 53:10

There is a verse in Isaiah that can stop you cold the first time you really read it.

Isaiah 53 is the great chapter of the Suffering Servant. It describes Jesus centuries before Bethlehem: despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, pierced for our rebellion and crushed for our sins. We love that chapter. We read it on Good Friday. And then, in verse 10, we run into this: “It was the LORD’s good plan to crush him.” Another translation says it even more bluntly: “The LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief” (Isaiah 53:10, NASB).

Pleased? If we’re honest, a sentence like that can make God sound cruel. Why would it please a Father to crush His only Son?

I don’t believe it pleased Him to watch His Son suffer. Scripture tells us what was in the heart of the One being crushed. In The Passion Translation, Hebrews puts it this way: “Because his heart was focused on the joy of knowing that you would be his, he endured the agony of the cross and conquered its humiliation” (Hebrews 12:2, TPT). The Father and the Son were looking past the cross to what the cross would produce. They were looking at you.

God doesn’t delight in our crushing, but He rejoices in what our crushing will produce.

That is the mystery this chapter is about. And I want to say right at the start: if you are in the middle of a crushing season right now, I’m not going to hand you a tidy answer and walk away. Some things about pain we will understand. Some things we won’t understand until eternity. But we can know the One who holds it.

What Is a Mystery?

Noah Webster's old 1828 dictionary defined a mystery as "a profound secret; something wholly unknown or something kept cautiously concealed, and therefore exciting curiosity or wonder."

I love that last part. A mystery is something hidden, but it was never meant to make us run away. It draws us in, the way a good story pulls you closer.

Oh, how great are God's riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways! For who can know the LORD's thoughts? Who knows enough to give him advice?

Romans 11:33–34

Paul wrote that after three chapters of wrestling with some of the hardest questions in the Bible. He didn't end with a formula. He ended in worship. Daniel did the same thing when God revealed a king's dream to him in the middle of the night: "He reveals deep and mysterious things and knows what lies hidden in darkness, though he is surrounded by light" (Daniel 2:22).

Pain is a mystery in exactly that sense. It didn't slip into God's universe and catch Him by surprise. He understands it completely, and we understand it only in part. That's why Paul told us, "For we live by believing and not by seeing" (2 Corinthians 5:7). If we could see the whole thing, we wouldn't need faith.

A line often credited to Charles Spurgeon says it well:

"To trust God in the light is nothing, but to trust him in the dark—that is faith."

Charles Spurgeon

A mystery is God's invitation to come closer.

It Pleased the Lord to Crush Him

The word *crushed* runs all through Scripture. Isaiah says the Messiah "was crushed for our sins" (Isaiah 53:5). David begs God to let "the bones you have crushed" rejoice again (Psalm 51:8, NIV). And one of the most tender promises in the Bible is written for crushed people:

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed.

Psalm 34:18

The crushing is a biblical term, and it's a biblical reality. It even touched the sinless Son of God. One of the deepest mysteries in all of Scripture is a single sentence in Hebrews: "Even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8).

Think about that. Jesus never sinned, never needed correcting, never wandered off. And yet the Son of God walked through suffering, and on the other side of it His obedience had been proven in the fire. If it was true for Him, it will be true for us. The confession of our obedience is one thing. The substance of our obedience gets tested in the crucible.

Jesus didn't just die so we could live. He died to show us how to live.

In the garden, Jesus prayed, "Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine" (Luke 22:42). He asked for another way. There wasn't one. And He drank the cup anyway, because of the joy set before Him.

Father-Filtered, Not Father-Authored

Here is where a lot of believers get confused, and where a lot of hurting people get wounded by bad theology. When something terrible happens, someone usually says, "Well, God did this to teach you something." I want to be very careful here, because that sentence has broken a lot of hearts.

God allowing something and God causing something are not the same.

The best way I know to say it is this: our pain is Father-filtered, not Father-authored. God is not the author of evil. Sickness, betrayal, abuse, injustice and death came into the world through sin and an enemy who comes "to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). But nothing reaches a son or daughter of God without passing through a Father's hands first. And what passes through His hands, He is able to use.

That is how Joseph could look at the brothers who sold him and say that what they meant for evil, God meant for good. What the enemy intended for destruction and what people did out of envy, God turned into training, and used to birth His purposes in a place I like to call the womb of destiny.

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

Romans 8:28

Notice what that verse doesn't say. It doesn't say everything is good. All things are not good. But God can turn tragedy into triumph, because He lives outside of time and He can see the end from the beginning. In His wisdom, He can take the enemy's greatest weapons against our hearts and turn them back against the kingdom of darkness.

I believe God, in His sovereignty, works through a mixture we would never choose for ourselves: blessing and pain, prosperity and persecution, seasons of favor and seasons of crushing. He even allows evil for a time. And He does it to bring the most love, the most worship, the most redemption and the most souls into His Kingdom for the glory of His name.

God is not the author of your pain, but He is the master of it.

The Group Chat

I'll tell you about a conversation that captures the tension many of us feel. Three friends I'll call Rosalind, Imogen and Thaddeus had just heard a pastor they respected say something from the pulpit that stuck with them all week: "It's narcissistic to think God needs your suffering."

That night Rosalind brought it up in their group chat. She couldn't stop chewing on it. Imogen reminded them both that Scripture says it pleased the Father to crush the Son.

Thaddeus jumped in. "He's right if he means we shouldn't crave pain or wear suffering like a badge. But that's not the whole picture. If the Father allowed the Son to be crushed, how arrogant to imagine we'll never face pain, suffering and hardship. It's not a 'but.' It's an 'and.' God allowing and God causing are not the same."

Then he brought up Paul. "Remember the very first prophetic word over Paul as a believer? Jesus told Ananias He would show Paul how much he must suffer for His name (Acts 9:16). If Jesus, the hero of the story, faced suffering, why do we think we get off the hook?"

He kept going. "Jesus told His disciples, 'Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world' (John 16:33). For the joy

set before Him He endured the cross. If He could hold that heart posture, why can't we? After the apostles were beaten, they left 'rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus' (Acts 5:41)."

Imogen answered, "We shouldn't seek suffering for its own sake. But we shouldn't deny that faithful obedience sometimes involves suffering either."

Rosalind sat with it for a while, and then she wrote something I think is wise. "For so many years I asked God to let me suffer for Him. Maybe the danger is making suffering our aim, when obedience should be the target. But denying that suffering can be part of following Jesus would deny the story of Christ. You're not saying God starts all suffering. You're saying God will call us to suffer. We can hold both truths in tension: God is sovereign, and suffering can be a path of fellowship with Christ."

I think Rosalind landed in the right place. God doesn't *need* our suffering, the way an insecure person needs attention. But He doesn't waste it either. Paul put it plainly:

And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering. Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.

Romans 8:17-18

Peter told believers not to be surprised by the fiery trials they were going through, "as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering" (1 Peter 4:12-13).

Suffering was never meant to be our aim. Obedience is the aim, and sometimes obedience bleeds.

The Atheist's Objection

Some atheists build their entire case against God on suffering. The argument usually goes like this: if a good and powerful God existed, there would be no unnecessary suffering in the world. There is unnecessary suffering. So there is no good God.

In one exchange, a Christian apologist answered an atheist making that argument. The apologist pointed out that the moment you deny God, you lose any absolute standard of right and wrong. Without Him, morality becomes a matter of opinion. And if morality is only opinion, then "unnecessary" and "evil" are just feelings too. The objection needs God in order to even make its case.

He compared it to a brand-new prescription drug that promises to cure a disease but has unknown side effects. Without rigorous testing and a reliable source of information, patients can only go by personal impressions of whether it's safe. In the same way, if there is no absolute truth, we have no reliable way to judge right from wrong, much less to judge God.

That doesn't make the pain go away. But it does tell us something: the very ache inside us that cries "This isn't right!" is evidence that we were made for a world where it would be right. We were made by a God who is just.

When we go through trials, we almost always ask the same question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" R.C. Sproul gave an answer I have never been able to shake:

"Why do bad things happen to good people? That only happened once, and He volunteered."

R.C. Sproul

Scripture is honest about us. "No one is righteous—not even one" (Romans 3:10). There has only ever been one truly good Man, and He walked into the worst suffering in history on purpose, for us.

Disaster or Good?

Here are two verses from the same prophet that seem to say opposite things. In one, God tells Jeremiah to warn His people, "I am planning disaster for you instead of good," and calls them to turn from their evil ways (Jeremiah 18:11). In the other, He says something we put on coffee mugs and graduation cards:

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."

Jeremiah 29:11

So which one is it? Is God planning disaster for His people, or good?

I believe the answer is both, at different levels. The disaster of Jeremiah 18 was God's discipline, meant to bring His people to the end of their own stubbornness and independence. The good of Jeremiah 29, spoken to people already in exile, was what that crushing would produce: hearts that were humble, repentant and dependent on Him again. We'll look closely at the difference between discipline and training in a

later chapter. For now, notice that even God's "disaster" was aimed at a future and a hope.

This is where every one of us comes to a crossroads. When the present doesn't match the promise, we will be tempted to lower our theology to match our pain. (We'll come back to that temptation later in the book, because it's one of the most dangerous in the last days.) Or we can surrender to the process and let God transform our minds and hearts on the way to our destiny.

So what do we do when we can't figure out what He's doing?

You have to trust His character when you don't understand His methods.

Trust is a rich word. Its synonyms include confidence, expectation, faith, hope, dependence and assurance. And no one ever lived in that kind of trust like Jesus. "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19). Jesus lived in complete dependence on His Father and complete trust in Him, even on the road to the cross.

God Hides in the Darkness

Sometimes God feels farthest away right when we need Him most. But Scripture suggests something surprising: often God is hiding in the very darkness we're afraid of.

And I will give you treasures hidden in the darkness—secret riches. I will do this so you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, the one who calls you by name.

Isaiah 45:3

A few verses later, God says, "I create the light and make the darkness. I send good times and bad times. I, the LORD, am the one who does these things" (Isaiah 45:7). And the prophet responds, "Truly, O God of Israel, our Savior, you work in mysterious ways" (Isaiah 45:15).

When God came down on Mount Sinai, the people were terrified and kept their distance. But Moses did something different: "As the people stood in the distance, Moses approached the dark cloud where God was" (Exodus 20:21). God was in the darkness. The people saw a storm. Moses saw an invitation.

So much of cultural Christianity treats God like a cosmic vending machine. Put in obedience, get out blessings, avoid pain. The God of the Bible is as present in the storm as He is in the sunshine. Darkness doesn't mean He has broken His promises. Very often the dark furnace is exactly where He forges beauty from ashes (Isaiah 61:3).

There is a difference between eyesight and insight. Eyesight shows us our external circumstances. Insight shows us God's divine plan to mold and shape our character through painful seasons.

And pain doesn't care where you live, how much you make or who you are. David had a throne, an army and a palace, and he still cried out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help?" (Psalm 22:1). One of the hidden burdens of success is that people assume prosperity protects you from pain, so you end up suffering privately because no one thinks you need comfort. Many chase money and power believing they'll build a fortress around their hearts. They won't. Centuries after David, Jesus prayed those same words from the cross (Matthew 27:46). The Son of God knows what it feels like when heaven seems silent.

Sometimes the darkness is where God keeps His treasures.

The Cross Is the Ultimate Collateral Beauty

Later in this book we'll spend a whole chapter on what I call collateral beauty: the unexpected beauty God brings out of our darkest seasons. But I want to plant the seed here, because the cross is the ultimate example.

The Father allowed Jesus, the Living Word, to be crucified and crushed, knowing that one day we would be His. The worst injustice in history became the doorway to salvation for the whole world. Collateral beauty takes the chaos of life and the crushing seasons, mixes in the sovereignty and goodness of God, and makes something beautiful that would never have been possible unless we had passed through the furnace.

Paul tells us exactly what God is making: "For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son" (Romans 8:29).

So here's the question I want to leave you with. The Father allowed His Son to be crushed so He could receive the reward of His suffering. What is that reward? His people, forged, formed and shaped in His image. Will we allow ourselves to be crushed, if that is what it takes for Jesus to receive the reward of His suffering in us?

If you're being crushed right now, I won't tell you it doesn't hurt. It does. But you are not being destroyed. You are in the hands of a Father who is close to the brokenhearted, who knows what lies hidden in the darkness, and who has never once wasted the pain of a son or daughter who kept trusting Him.

For the Road

1. Have you ever been told, or told yourself, that God *caused* your pain? How does the idea of pain that is "Father-filtered, not Father-authored" change the way you see that season?
2. Rosalind said the danger is making suffering our aim instead of obedience. Where have you been tempted toward either extreme: craving pain as proof of devotion, or refusing to believe God would ever let you suffer?
3. What is one area of your life where you don't understand God's methods right now? What do you know to be true about His character that you can hold on to there?

God doesn't delight in your crushing, but He knows exactly what it will produce, and He is producing Christ in you.

Things Aren't Always What They Seem

“For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”

Isaiah 55:9

There's a story often told about a young boy who found a butterfly cocoon and brought it into his house. He watched as the butterfly inside struggled to break free. It managed to make a small opening, but its body looked far too large to squeeze through.

Wanting to help, the boy took a pair of scissors and carefully cut a slit in the cocoon. The butterfly came out easily. The boy waited for it to spread its wings and fly. It never did. It could only drag its undeveloped wings along the ground.

What the boy didn't understand was that the butterfly needed the struggle. The pressure of squeezing through that small opening was what strengthened its body and prepared its wings for flight. Without that battle, it would never soar.

We often think God is being harsh when He allows us to go through hard things. If we had our way, we'd rush in with the scissors and save the day. But what we think is the cure may be the very thing that keeps us coddled, undeveloped and unable to rise up on wings like eagles.

The same God who hides a mighty oak inside a tiny seed, a butterfly inside a humble caterpillar and a diamond inside a rough lump of coal also hides His resurrection power inside the crushing.

What feels like confinement may be preparation. What feels like resistance may be producing strength.

The Upside-Down Kingdom

In Christ we serve an upside-down Kingdom. In the natural, growing up means becoming less dependent on your parents. Spiritually, it works the opposite way. The more we mature, the more dependent on God we become.

That shift can be subtle. As we grow in favor with God and people, it's easy to become confident in our own ability and forget that it's God's Spirit within us who transforms and sustains us. That's one reason hard seasons carry purpose. We often discover in the wilderness of rejection and the cave of despair what we expected to find in the palace of promotion: the presence, power and sufficiency of God.

People like to say God will never give you more than you can handle. I don't find that promise in Scripture. I think God will often let you get in over your head. He isn't being cruel. He knows that's where real life with Him begins. So many people never reach their potential or quit too early because they believe the lie that they are only called to do what they can accomplish with their own gifts and talents.

You were never called to a life limited by what you can do in your own strength.

You Cannot Play God

There's a 2004 film called *The Butterfly Effect* about a young man who discovers he can go back into moments from his troubled childhood by reading his old journals. Every time he changes something in the past, he wakes up in a new present. And every time, his "fix" breaks something else he never saw coming. His father, who has the same ability, warns him in effect that he can't play God.

We often think like that young man. If only I had made different choices. If only that hadn't happened. If only I could go back and fix it. But the film exposes the vanity of that mindset. Trying to play God over our own timelines would unravel the plan that God, in His genius and sovereignty, has already written as the answer to our mistakes and to the chaos of a broken world.

God is not a character we can rewrite in our own image. He is the Author. He writes our redemption story according to His plans and purposes. So refuse to fixate on your pain. Fix your eyes on His goodness, faithfulness and love.

Another film, *The Family Man*, paints the same truth from a different angle. A wealthy Wall Street bachelor is given a glimpse of the life he walked away from: a wife he once loved, kids, a minivan, an ordinary job. At first he fights that life with everything in him. But pressing through it changes him, and he comes back to his own world knowing what actually matters.

Sometimes the pursuit of happiness can shipwreck the pursuit of righteousness.

Facts, Feelings and Circumstantial Evidence

Sometimes the facts and feelings of our circumstances don't match the truth of God's goodness. When you feel crushed, that feeling can hide the truth that your feelings are not the final word on God's promises or His character.

Think about how a courtroom works. With circumstantial evidence, jurors have to "connect the dots" and draw inferences from what they're shown. A person can even be convicted on circumstantial evidence alone, but usually only when several pieces point clearly in the same direction.

Here's the difference. Circumstantial evidence says, "I think it snowed last night, because there was snow on the ground when I woke up." Factual evidence says, "I woke up last night, looked out the window, and saw it snowing."

Your feelings are circumstantial evidence. The Word of God and the Spirit of truth are eyewitness testimony. So here's a question worth asking yourself: do you focus on biblical truth, or on your feelings about it?

When the pain speaks louder than the truth, remember:

- **Noah.** Fact: Noah got drunk. Truth: Noah built an ark that saved his family.
- **Jonah.** Fact: Jonah ran from God. Truth: Jonah became a prophetic voice to a godless city.
- **Paul.** Fact: Paul hunted down and persecuted believers. Truth: Paul laid the foundation for the New Testament church.
- **Gideon.** Fact: Gideon felt insecure. Truth: Gideon became a general in the army of the Lord.
- **Martha.** Fact: Martha felt worried. Truth: she got to serve Jesus in the flesh.
- **Thomas.** Fact: Thomas felt doubt. Truth: he got to touch the wounds in Jesus' hands.
- **Sarah.** Fact: Sarah felt impatient. Truth: she gave birth to Isaac, the son of promise.
- **Elijah.** Fact: Elijah felt so depressed he wanted to die. Truth: God fed him, met him in a gentle whisper and sent him back out with a new assignment.
- **Moses.** Fact: Moses said he wasn't a good speaker. Truth: he became the deliverer of God's people.
- **Lazarus.** Fact: Lazarus was dead. Truth: Jesus raised him from the dead.

Don't let your circumstances define you. God's editing turns our failures and weaknesses into demonstrations of His faithfulness and of His will to finish what He started.

Sometimes it feels like you've been buried, when really you've been planted.

We misdiagnose our feelings of being crushed, when the truth is we're being refined into the people God always created us to be. It can feel like you've been abandoned, when in reality God has made you a divine reservation to meet with Him in a new and intimate way.

We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.

2 Corinthians 4:8-9

God promises that He won't let us be crushed, even when the pressing feels that way. When we don't understand the reason for our painful circumstances, we have to trust His plan, His promises and His process.

Eyes to See

Over and over, Scripture shows us that things are not always what they seem.

In Exodus 14, Pharaoh looked down on the Israelites. He had let them go because of the plagues, but now he regretted it and wanted revenge. He thought he had them trapped with their backs against the Red Sea. But things are not always what they seem.

In 1 Samuel 17, Goliath looked down on a teenage shepherd and mocked him. He thought he would quickly crush David. David ended up crushing him.

On the day Jesus died, it looked as if the enemy had won and God's Messiah had failed. But on the third day, the women at the tomb heard, "Why are you looking among the dead for someone who is alive? He isn't here! He is risen from the dead!" (Luke 24:5-6). Paul says the rulers of this world didn't understand God's hidden plan, "if they had, they would not have crucified our glorious Lord" (1 Corinthians 2:8).

In Genesis 50, Joseph looked back on the long road that began when his own brothers sold him into slavery. It had looked like a story of betrayal and despair. But God raised him to power in Egypt and used him to save countless lives in a famine.

You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.

Genesis 50:20

In Daniel 6, Daniel was thrown into a den of lions for praying to his God. It looked like a death sentence arranged by his enemies. In the morning he told the king, “My God sent his angel to shut the lions’ mouths so that they would not hurt me” (Daniel 6:22). Here’s a question I love to ask: Are you in the lions’ den, or are the lions in the den with you?

In each of these stories, God’s people were tempted to overestimate their pain and underestimate God’s plan. God was working behind the scenes the whole time, turning the enemy’s attacks into trophies of His grace.

Think about it this way. If Joseph had never been sold into slavery, would he have become second in command in Egypt? If David’s family hadn’t overlooked him, would he have learned to strengthen himself in the Lord? Would we understand the depth of God’s love for His people without Hosea and Gomer? Would we know the price of obedience without John the Baptist? And what would have happened to humanity if Jesus had never gone to the cross?

The Smoke on the Horizon

There’s an old story about a man who was shipwrecked and stranded on an island. Every day he prayed for God to send someone to rescue him, and every day no one came. Months went by. He learned to survive, built a small hut and filled it with everything he had gathered.

One day he came back from hunting and found his hut on fire. Everything he owned was going up in smoke. At first he was in shock. Then he was furious. He shook his fist at the sky and shouted, “God, how could You let this happen to me? I’ve prayed every day for months and no one has come, and now everything I have is burning!”

Later he was on his knees, weeping, when he looked up and saw a ship coming toward the island. On the way home he asked the captain, “How did you find me?”

The captain said, “We saw a column of smoke on the horizon, so we came to check it out.”

The fire you’re cursing may be the signal that brings your rescue.

Maybe

There's an old parable about a poor farmer in China whose horse ran away. His neighbors came by and said, "Well, that's too bad." The farmer said, "Maybe."

Soon the horse came back, bringing another horse with it. The neighbors said, "What good fortune!" The farmer said, "Maybe."

The next day his son tried to tame the new horse, fell and broke his leg. "That's too bad," said the neighbors. "Maybe," said the farmer.

Not long after, the emperor declared war and ordered every able-bodied young man to fight. Many died or were badly wounded. The farmer's son was spared because of his broken leg. "What good fortune," said the neighbors. And the farmer said, "Maybe."

We are so quick to diagnose our current situation without putting eternity into the equation.

You can make many plans, but the LORD's purpose will prevail.

Proverbs 19:21

Isaiah reminds us that people are like grass: "The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8). The pain of a trial is temporary. It can't compare with the eternal glory waiting for God's children who patiently endure His refining.

So let me ask you: Are you preservation driven, pleasure driven, prosperity driven or purpose driven? Your answer will shape how you read every hard season.

Perception

As the saying goes, "We don't see things as they are; we see things as we are." Two people can walk through the same storm. One comes out offended. The other comes out with a testimony. The difference is usually what they were looking at.

In God's Kingdom, perspective is everything.

Paul learned that better than anyone. He had received extraordinary revelations, and he also had a thorn in his flesh. (We'll look at that thorn closely in Chapter 5.) He begged God three times to take it away. Here's what God said, and how Paul responded:

Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” 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.

2 Corinthians 12:9–10

We want strength *from* our weakness, as if God’s job were to get us out of it. Paul discovered strength *in* weakness. He wasn’t defeated by his limitations. He found that weakness had become a doorway to God’s power.

Embracing our limits, our hardships and our crushing seasons is a blessing, not a burden, for anyone who never wants to forget that without Jesus’ saving power we are spiritually bankrupt.

The actress Mary Tyler Moore is often quoted as saying something that rings true for every believer who has been through the fire:

“Pain nourishes courage. You can’t be brave if you’ve only had wonderful things happen to you.”

Mary Tyler Moore

So here’s the question Paul’s life puts to us. Can we really delight in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and troubles suffered for Christ? If we can, those things become more than pain. They become a doorway to His power and authority, and they make us trophies of His grace. Do we only want to sing about the refiner’s fire, or are we willing to be changed by it?

Whatever you’re facing right now, it may not be what it seems. The cocoon may be making your wings. The fire may be calling your rescue. And the grave you think you’ve been buried in may turn out to be the soil where God planted you.

For the Road

1. Where in your life right now are you tempted to reach for the scissors, either for yourself or for someone you love, and cut short a struggle God may be using?
2. Write down one “fact” about your current season and one “truth” from God’s Word that speaks louder than it. Which have you been listening to more?

3. Think of a past season that looked like a disaster at the time. Looking back, what did God build in you there that you couldn't see then?

Things aren't always what they seem, but God is always who He says He is.

PART TWO

The Crushing

What is God making out of my pain?

Grapes Are Made for Wine

I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more.

John 15:1-2

T.D. Jakes tells a story from when he was nine years old. He had watched his mother work on her rose bush, and one day he decided to help. He picked up the shears and started cutting the way he had seen her cut. But he didn't know where to stop, and he cut that bush back much too far.

When his mother saw it, he tried to explain. "Mom, I was only doing what I saw you do."

Her answer has stayed with me for years. "You weren't doing what I was doing, because I know how to cut."

A nine-year-old with shears and a master gardener with shears are holding the same tool. One of them destroys the plant. The other one saves it. The difference is not the blade. The difference is the hand.

God is the Divine Surgeon who knows when, where and how to cut.

That's the comfort of this chapter. When the cutting comes, and it will, you are not in the hands of a careless child. You are in the hands of a Father who knows exactly what He is doing.

The Parable of the Vine

One of the last things Jesus taught His disciples before the cross was a lesson about grapes. On the night He was betrayed, He told them about a vine, a gardener and a pair of pruning shears. He was warning them, as gently as He could, about the pain, the suffering and the patience it takes to be trained for divine purpose.

Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:5

Notice who gets cut. The fruitless branch gets cut off. But the fruitful branch gets cut too. You would think that if a branch was producing fruit, the gardener would leave it alone. He doesn't. He prunes it so it will produce even more.

Pruning is the prize of the fruitful.

That's hard to hear when you're the one being cut. Pruning feels like punishment, not promotion. If you've been faithful, and you've been fruitful, and now it feels like God is cutting away things you loved, it's natural to ask what you did wrong. But the vine teaches us a different question: what is He making room for?

There are seasons when God seems more like a slayer with a knife than a surgeon with a scalpel. That's when we have to lean on His goodness and His mercy, not on our perspective and our plans.

Anyone who has tended a garden knows that a plant can grow a lot and still bear very little. Excessive growth tends to produce less fruit. Growth doesn't always mean fruitfulness. And gardeners will tell you that regular pruning lessens the need for severe pruning later.

The Christian life works the same way. Most triumphs in life and ministry are followed by trials and valleys. We wish it were otherwise. We'd love constant growth, constant success, a line on the chart that only goes up. But that isn't healthy. There have to be seasons when God cuts us back, reveals our frailty and shows us our need for Him alone. Nothing will insulate a believer from trouble. God uses the trouble for our good. There is a continual cycle of blessing, refining, death and resurrection, and through it all He is transforming us into the image of His Son. Not even our mistakes and our disobedience will stop the Father's holy pursuit to have all of you.

What if God is pruning you, not to punish you, but to protect you and promote you? He knows exactly where to press to get the oil of intimacy out of you.

Grapes Grow Best in Harsh Soil

Here's something that surprises people about grapes. They grow best in harsh soil and harsh weather. Easy ground makes for lazy roots. Hard ground makes the roots go deep looking for what they need.

When God allows us to stand in the middle of hard and volatile circumstances, it is not because He hates us. It's because He knows that trials and testing are what make our roots grow deep.

Israel didn't understand that. After everything God had done to bring them out of Egypt, they stood at the edge of the Promised Land and read their circumstances completely wrong.

You complained in your tents and said, "The LORD must hate us. That's why he has brought us here from Egypt—to hand us over to the Amorites to be slaughtered."

Deuteronomy 1:27

They looked at hard soil and concluded they were unloved. The truth was the opposite. The God who had split the sea for them was trying to grow something in them that could actually possess the land.

So here's the question every one of us faces in a hard season. Will we abandon the process and the pruning because it feels like God's punishment?

Peter (PJ) Vescovi says it this way:

"When a temporary emotion leads to a permanent decision you open yourself up to a lifetime of regret. You will not always feel how you feel, but you will always remember the choices you make."

PJ Vescovi

Don't make a permanent decision about God in a temporary season of pruning.

Pain can make you bitter, or it can make you better. Think about a weight room. You don't need the weights to cooperate with you. You need them to resist you. That resistance is the whole point. So the real question in a hard season is this: will we surrender to the Father's crushing so we can be strengthened, or will we abort His process so we can be comfortable?

I've noticed something about how we pray as we get older. In our twenties and thirties, most of us are hoping God will change our external circumstances. By our forties and fifties, many of us start to realize that God has been trying to change our perspective on our external circumstances. The soil didn't always get softer. Our roots

got deeper. To understand God's plans for your life, you have to focus on eternity, not just your earthly plans.

Crushed and Stored in the Dark

If you owned a vineyard, what would be the best way to get value from the grapes you harvested?

You'd make wine.

Grapes are one of the few fruits that are cultivated in order to be picked, pruned, trampled, crushed and put in a dark place so they can be turned into something special. Leave a grape in its original form and it will never reach its full potential. It will last one season and then it will rot. But prune it, pick it, crush it, and store it in the dark for a long time, and what comes out can last for centuries.

That's why God loves us too much to leave us in our original form. The crushing and the crucible are necessary to make the new wine of a new heart.

Often when we feel like we're being tortured, we're really being trained.

If grapes could scream, they would cry out from the pain of becoming wine. But if they can endure the pain, the pressure and the process, they can be served to CEOs, kings and presidents, with the power to intoxicate people with the presence of God's love.

The problem is that most of us want the process of Kool-Aid with the result of wine. Kool-Aid is quick. You tear open a packet, stir in some sugar, and you're done in thirty seconds. Nobody saves Kool-Aid for a special occasion. We want the comfort and ease of making Kool-Aid, but we want the strength, value, intoxicating power and endurance of wine. It doesn't work that way.

To line up with God's will, we have to be willing to be

cleansed, cut, crushed and contained

. Cleansed of what doesn't belong. Cut back so we can bear more. Crushed until what's inside comes out. Contained in a dark season that may feel like God has abandoned us, when in reality that's where the change is happening. Through that process we become new wine with the power to influence and impact others and lead them into real intimacy with the Divine Vinedresser.

Bread, Wine and Oil

When I teach on this, I like to ask a few simple questions.

When we make bread, we take the flour for granted. What has that flour already been through? It's been *refined*.

When we want the best value from grapes, what must they endure? *Crushing*.

When we want the best value from olives, what must they endure? *Pressing*.

How does grape juice become wine? Through *dark seasons*, sealed away where no one can see.

And when someone crushes grapes the old way, with their feet, what does the heel look like at the end of the day? *Bruised*.

Isaiah used that same kind of language about the Messiah. The prophet said it was the Lord's plan to crush Him (Isaiah 53:10). We wrestled with that mystery in Chapter 2. Here I just want you to see the pattern. Bread, wine and oil can't be made until the most important ingredients are refined, broken, crushed, pressed and left in darkness.

That's why Communion matters so much.

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."

1 Corinthians 11:23–24 (NIV)

Every time we take the bread and the cup, and every time we anoint someone with oil, we are holding a reminder of the crushing, the pain and the suffering Christ endured for our salvation. And we're holding an invitation to join Him in the fellowship of His sufferings, to die daily to the wisdom of man so we can be formed and fashioned for our divine destiny.

No Brokenness, No Multiplication

There's another bread story in the Gospels that shows the same pattern.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied.

Mark 6:41-42 (NIV)

Look at the order. Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, and then broke it. The multiplication didn't happen while the loaves were whole. It happened in the breaking.

No brokenness, no multiplication.

Brokenness, or feeling crushed, produces multiplication when we set our eyes on Jesus, stay thankful, and surrender to the process of the pain. The question is whether we will let the Potter press us like clay so we can become a vessel His presence can fill.

God has a way of turning pain into purpose, pressure into power, and our trials into divine training.

Your Calling Is Going to Crush You

I need to say something plainly. Your calling is going to crush you.

If you're called to mend the brokenhearted, you're going to wrestle with disappointment, despair and rejection.

If you're called to prophesy, you're going to struggle to control your tongue, to know when to be silent, and to keep people from stealing your voice.

If you're called to lay hands on the sick, you're going to battle physical pain and emotional despair.

If you're called to preach and teach the gospel, you're going to be sifted by trials and testing that build the wisdom to press through hard seasons. That wisdom will eventually anoint the messages you're called to speak.

If you're called to empower and promote others, your self-esteem and confidence will be attacked. Your gifts and talents will be questioned, disregarded and dismissed by people, and your successes will be quickly forgotten or ignored.

Your calling will come with cups of suffering, thorns, crushing, afflictions and sifting. They are what make a calling authentic, consecrated, tender, humble and powerful,

able to carry true authority. Your crushing won't be easy, because your purpose isn't small.

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

Your calling and destiny are significant because He can trust you with His story. Don't lose heart. Don't give up. You were made to impact history.

I think of Bill Johnson, who lost his wife to cancer after decades of marriage. He had prayed for her healing and didn't see it. In the middle of that disappointment, he said something I've never forgotten:

"Worshipping in pain is only possible on this side of heaven so this is a divine privilege."

Bill Johnson

That is oil that was not cheap.

Caves of Rejection, Wombs of Destiny

While I was preparing to teach this message, someone asked me what my biggest giant had been. I didn't have to think long. It was the pain of being rejected by my family and friends.

I won't tell that story in detail here. Some wounds are better carried before the Lord than put on display. But I will tell you what I found in that cave. I found a Father:

To the fatherless he is a father. To the widow he is a champion friend. To the lonely he gives a family.

Psalms 68:5-6 (TPT)

Rejection by the people closest to you has a way of reaching places other pain can't touch. Jeremiah knew it. He wrote that even his old friends were watching him, "waiting for a fatal slip" (Jeremiah 20:10). Jesus knew it most of all.

He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.

Isaiah 53:3

And Joseph knew it. We love to talk about Joseph's coat, Joseph's dreams and Joseph's palace. But I believe Joseph's biggest giant was not Potiphar's wife or the prison or the

famine. It was rejection by his own family. His brothers threw him in a pit and sold him. Years later, standing in the palace with the power to repay them, he told them that what they had intended for harm, God had intended for good, so that many lives could be saved.

Joseph's life is a living picture of Romans 8:28. God never said all things are good. He said He works all things together for the good of those who love Him. Things that are difficult, bad or complicated can still lead to good when we trust the Father's ways more than our personal preferences.

David walked a similar road. When the prophet came to anoint one of Jesse's sons, David wasn't even invited in from the field. Being overlooked by his own family brought him to the end of himself, and the end of himself became the beginning of his knowledge of God.

Many people want to walk in the blessings of the Joseph mantle. Very few want to walk in the burdens that come with it.

"Your biggest places of warfare are your biggest places of inheritance."

Corey Russell

Our caves of rejection often become our wombs of destiny.

If you're in that cave right now, I won't pretend it doesn't hurt. It does. But a cave can be a tomb, or it can be a womb, and the difference is what you let God do with you while you're in it. The same place where the enemy wants to plant regret and rejection is the very place God wants to birth revelation.

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, and He rescues those whose spirits are crushed (Psalm 34:18). He hasn't forgotten the grape in the dark. He's making wine.

For the Road

1. Where do you feel God's pruning shears in your life right now? What might He be making room for?
2. In what area have you been wanting the speed of Kool-Aid while hoping for the value of wine?
3. Think about your calling. What crushing has come with it, and how might that crushing be producing oil God can use to help others?

**You are not being destroyed by a careless hand. You are being made into wine
by a Gardener who knows how to cut.**

Your Crown, Your Cross, Your Thorn

When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required.

Luke 12:48

Every parent I know has the same instinct. We want to protect our kids, shelter them and defend them at all costs. If we could clear every enemy out of their path, most of us would do it without a second thought.

That's what makes a short passage in the book of Judges so surprising. After Israel entered the Promised Land, God, the perfect Father, did something no anxious parent would do. He left enemies in the land on purpose.

These are the nations that the LORD left in the land to test those Israelites who had not experienced the wars of Canaan. He did this to teach warfare to generations of Israelites who had no experience in battle.

Judges 3:1-2

God wanted the next generation to be battle-tested. Knowing the art of war mattered so much to Him that He was willing to let His children face danger, because He knew that the experience of war is very different from the information of warfare. You can read about a battle. Or you can fight one.

Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese general, put it in a line that is still quoted today:

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles."

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

Our fight isn't against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12). But the principle holds. To win, you have to know the enemy, and you have to know yourself. This chapter is about knowing yourself: the three things every believer carries, and how God uses all three to train us.

The Three Things You Carry

I call them your crown, your cross and your thorn.

Your crown reveals your potential. Your cross shapes your character. Your thorn guards your heart.

Together they form the rhythm of spiritual maturity. God uses all three to develop a believer who is strong, refined, surrendered and usable for His purposes. They don't take turns. These three realities operate at the same time, in the same life, so that you can reach your destiny in God.

- **Your crown** is what you are called and equipped to do.
- **Your cross** is what you must endure with faith, trust and surrender.
- **Your thorn** is what keeps you humble and dependent on God.

Let's look at each one.

Your Crown

To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability.

Matthew 25:15 (ESV)

Your crown is your gifts and talents, entrusted for service. It represents what God has placed in your hands: the gifts, talents, opportunities, influence, resources and spiritual deposits He's given you for Kingdom service.

Paul described the same thing with the picture of a body. "Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other. In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well" (Romans 12:4–6).

Think of David. God crowned him with musical gifts, leadership gifts and a gift for worship, and those gifts were given to serve Israel. The psalms he wrote in caves are still feeding God's people three thousand years later. That's what a crown is for. So ask yourself: which gift has God placed in you that others need, and how will you steward it for His glory rather than for personal praise?

Your crown is not about competition. It's about calling, purpose and stewardship. God gives each person a unique measure based on what they're called to accomplish in their generation. When Jesus told Peter how he would one day die, Peter turned

around, pointed at John and asked, “What about him, Lord?” Jesus answered, “What is that to you? As for you, follow me” (John 21:21–22). Your crown was never meant to be measured against your neighbor’s.

Your crown symbolizes three things:

1. **Authority and spiritual jurisdiction** in the areas God has entrusted to you, not your neighbor.
2. **Responsibility** to use what you have, not what you wish you had.
3. **Accountability** for how you steward and multiply what God gave you.

To wear your crown well means you recognize, develop and deploy your gifts. You don’t bury them out of fear, insecurity or comparison. Your crown is God saying, “I have equipped you. Steward what I gave you.”

Peter wrote, “God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another” (1 Peter 4:10). Your crown is not for self-promotion or identity. It’s for God’s glory and the blessing of others.

Here’s the catch. When we pray, “God, use me,” we often mean, “God, use my gifts and put my talents on display.” But God often wants to use our character to display His glory more than He wants to use our gifts.

Gifts draw crowds, but character builds God’s Kingdom.

Your Cross

Then he said to the crowd, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me.”

Luke 9:23

Your cross is the hard circumstance that demands daily surrender. It represents the external pressures, hardships and situations you didn’t choose but must carry with faith, trust and obedience.

Your cross might be:

- dysfunctional parents, or an absent parent, growing up
- mental or physical abuse in your home growing up
- financial limitations or poverty

The anthem of your cross sounds like this: *“I did not sign up for this.”*

Your cross is the place where your plans and your will die, and where God's will and purposes are formed in you. It's the daily decision to follow Jesus when life is inconvenient, when obedience is costly, when the path is narrow and when surrender is uncomfortable.

Ask yourself what present burden, or what part of your calling, is asking you to lay down control and follow Jesus' way of sacrificial obedience.

Jesus is our example. He bore the cross by choosing obedience to the Father's will, surrendering Himself for the redemption of others.

Your cross builds perseverance, trust, obedience, character and spiritual maturity. It's the refining process that shapes you into the image of Christ.

God uses your cross not to break you, but to build you into someone who looks like Jesus.

Your Thorn

Even though I have received such wonderful revelations from God. 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. Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness."

2 Corinthians 12:7-9

Your thorn is different from your cross. Your cross usually comes from the outside. Your thorn is an internal limitation or ongoing struggle, often hidden from the people around you or hard for them to understand, that keeps you humble and dependent on God.

Thorns can look like anxiety, insecurity, emotional wounds, a tendency toward fear or doubt, recurring weaknesses or mental battles.

The anthem of your thorn sounds like this: *"Lord, heal me of this debilitating weakness."*

Paul prayed that prayer three times. God didn't remove the thorn. He gave Paul grace instead. Why?

- Because your thorn prevents pride.
- Because your thorn keeps you close.

- Because your thorn reminds you that strength comes from God, not self-effort.

Your thorn is not your identity. It's a reminder that your strength, value and identity are found in Christ. It's the place where grace is experienced, His power is perfected, humility is fashioned and dependence is forged. What many people call their personal cross or thorn is really a reminder that they are not the hero of the story.

Paul is our example here. Afflicted with a thorn in the flesh, he learned to rely on God's grace and even to boast in his weakness. What ongoing weakness keeps pointing you to your limits? It may be the very place God wants to meet you with sustaining grace.

Your thorn is where God's strength meets you.

When the Crown Becomes an Escape

Here's where it gets dangerous. When our cross seems too heavy and our thorn too painful, we can be tempted to use our crown to open a door to sin that we know should have stayed closed.

What do Samson, Saul, David and Solomon have in common? Each of them used his crown to numb the pain of his own cross and thorn, and let personal desire quench the will of God.

- **Samson** was gifted with supernatural strength, yet he repeatedly abandoned his divine purpose for personal passion. His crown, his vow and his strength, was compromised through his intimacy with Delilah. Desire undermined his calling and brought humiliation before restoration.
- **Saul** was the anointed king, but his insecurity led him to act impulsively and disobey God. He used royal authority to cover fear and jealousy, let his personal will override the prophetic command, and lost the kingdom.
- **David** was a man after God's own heart, and still he abused his power for lust and convenience with Bathsheba and Uriah. His repentance restored his relationship with God, but his compromise left lasting consequences in his house.
- **Solomon** was anointed with wisdom, yet he was weakened by his desire for women and used his riches to marry many foreign wives who worshiped idols. His crown of wisdom and wealth made room for compromise. Scripture says his heart turned away from the Lord, who had appeared to him twice, and the kingdom was torn from his family (1 Kings 11:9–11). Solomon squandered all three. He let God's

gifts of wisdom, wealth and a secure throne seed complacency and indulgence. He abandoned the humble, obedient calling of covenant leadership for idol worship and political compromise. And he gave in to his appetites for pleasure, wealth and foreign wives until his heart hardened and judgment came.

People who are anointed and blessed with great wealth, talent, revelation, beauty or resources are held to a higher standard of accountability. They're expected to use those gifts to serve God and bless others.

The greater the crown, the greater the crushing.

That's not because God is punishing us. It's because He's preparing us. Spiritual authority and power can be used to serve the false god called *self*, so the Father develops self-discipline and self-control in the people He trusts with much.

We have watched this happen in our own generation, and I say this with grief, not with stones in my hands. Carl Lentz was dismissed by Hillsong in 2020 for infidelity. A commissioned investigation by Ravi Zacharias' ministry in 2021 found that he had committed sexual misconduct. Brian Houston resigned from Hillsong in 2022 after the church reported inappropriate conduct toward two women. Jimmy Swaggart confessed his sin before his congregation in 1988. Jim Bakker's ministry collapsed in scandal in 1987, and he was convicted of fraud in 1989.

These were gifted men, and God used their gifts to touch many lives. I don't name them to tear them down. I name them because every one of us carries a crown, a cross and a thorn, and none of us is above the fall. The enemy doesn't only want our gifts. He wants our testimony, because if he can discredit the witness, he can try to discredit the message. "There but for the grace of God go I" is not a cliché. It's the only safe posture for anyone who carries a crown.

And remember David. His fall was real and its consequences were real, but so was his repentance, and God restored him. Grace doesn't excuse a fall, but it does lead us home from one. The goal of naming these stories is not to shame anyone. It's to make us tender, watchful and quick to repent.

Our Will Be Done

There's a moment in the TV series *The Flash* that pictures this temptation well. After his father is killed, Barry Allen's crown, cross and thorn all become unbearably painful at once. His crown is his supernatural speed. His cross is the call to lay down

selfish ambition and accept loss. His thorn is his own limitation. Refusing to accept the injustice life handed him, he uses his speed to run back in time and save his mother. In doing so, he rejects the cross of accepting his loss, and he unleashes destructive consequences on the whole timeline.

That's the daily wrestle of the Christian life. Gifts meant for purpose and service can be misused in grief and pain. True discipleship calls us to daily surrender, and a persistent weakness should drive us to rely on the Father's grace rather than on our own fixes. "Thy will be done" quietly becomes "our will be done."

So when grief or guilt comes, will you steward your gifts, take up your cross and welcome God's grace? Or will you try to rewrite your story with your own desires and risk greater harm?

There's another thread in that series worth noticing. Barry's enemy found out who he would become and went back to attack him as a child, hoping a tragedy would keep him from ever becoming the hero. Sometimes the enemy knows our name, and our destiny, better than we do. The attacks on your life may have less to do with bad luck and more to do with who you are becoming.

Faithfulness, Not Flawlessness

Let me come back to where we started, with parents, because this is where a lot of us feel the weight of our crown, cross and thorn the most.

You'll never have joy in something you think you're failing at. Parents who feel ashamed of falling short of an ideal are often weighed down by a false sense of responsibility. They equate provision with perfection and rescue with righteousness.

A biblical worldview reframes that guilt. It acknowledges real failure without letting failure dictate the final outcome. Scripture calls parents to faithfulness, not flawlessness. We are stewards, not saviors. John the Baptist summed up our job: "He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less" (John 3:30). When parents fixate on their own brokenness, they risk repeating their parents' mistakes instead of depending on Christ.

The healthier posture is humble transparency. Own your mistakes. Seek repentance and restoration. Show your kids how grace repairs and redirects. Parenting with excellence means persistent faithfulness, wise boundaries, sacrificial love and training children toward God-ward maturity. It does not mean flawless execution.

God isn't asking you to be a flawless parent. He's asking you to be a faithful one.

And remember the Father in Judges 3. Even He let His kids face enemies. Not because He didn't love them, but because He did.

The righteous person faces many troubles, but the LORD comes to the rescue each time.

Psalm 34:19

So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up (Galatians 6:9).

For the Road

1. Name your crown, your cross and your thorn. Which of the three is hardest for you to accept right now?
2. When your cross feels too heavy or your thorn too painful, where are you most tempted to use your crown to find relief outside God's will?
3. Where do you need to trade the pressure of flawlessness for the freedom of faithfulness, in your parenting or in another place God has entrusted to you?

Wear your crown with humility, carry your cross with trust, and let your thorn keep you close to the One whose grace is all you need.

Instant Faith, Enduring Faith

This vision is for a future time. It describes the end, and it will be fulfilled. If it seems slow in coming, wait patiently, for it will surely take place. It will not be delayed.

Habakkuk 2:3

In my mid-thirties, a knee infection took away my ability to walk for six weeks. For a man who had made his living with his body, that was humbling enough. But the hardest moment of those six weeks had nothing to do with my knee.

One night my son, still a young boy, crumpled onto my bed with tears streaming down his face. He clenched the sheets in his fists and asked me a question I have never forgotten.

“Why won’t God fix you?”

I swallowed my own fear, looked into his eyes, and told him the only thing I knew to be true. “We don’t always have to understand. We just trust His character.”

I wish I could tell you I said it with total confidence. I didn’t. I said it because it was true, and because I needed to hear it as much as he did. That little boy had been raised on stories of a God who heals, and he was right to believe them. What he hadn’t learned yet, and what I was still learning, is that the same God who heals in a moment also walks with us through the months when He doesn’t.

Sometimes it feels like God is destroying you, when in reality He is developing you.

Crushed, Confused, but Not Forgotten

Years later, that same son was the one in the bed.

In his senior football season, he broke his leg. It was his tibia, and it required surgery. Scouts from the top programs who had been interested in him backed off. The future

he had worked for, the one that had seemed so close, suddenly looked like it was slipping through his fingers.

He had a choice to make, and so did I as his father. We could focus on what was lost, or we could focus on what was still ahead.

He chose to fight. Within ten days of surgery, he was back in the weight room lifting. That was faster than anyone expected, and I give God the glory for it. But being able to lift weights is not the same as being able to play. The bone still had to heal all the way through. It was about eleven months before he was back on the field.

Those eleven months were full of emotion. Frustration, discouragement, impatience, hope, and back again. But he kept grinding through the process, and God was faithful. He still earned full scholarships to play college football. The door that seemed to slam shut when his leg broke had only been delayed.

Watching my son walk through that season taught me something about the way God works. There was a miracle at the beginning: he was in the weight room within days. And there was a long, slow process after it. Both were from God. Neither canceled the other.

Here's how I'd say it now:

A delayed promise is still a divine promise, and an accelerated healing is still a miraculous healing.

Just because you don't love the process doesn't mean the process isn't necessary and ordained by God.

Two Kinds of Faith

Scripture shows us two kinds of faith, and we need both.

The first is

instant faith

. A woman who had been bleeding for twelve years pushed through a crowd, touched the hem of Jesus' robe, and was healed on the spot.

And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over."

Mark 5:34

The second is

enduring faith

. It's the faith that keeps trusting when the answer hasn't come yet.

But they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah 40:31 (ESV)

Notice who receives that promise: "they who wait."

Faith in the moment has the power to see the will of God expedited, and I believe in it with all my heart. I've seen it. But enduring faith sees God Himself as the treasure in the field. It will give up everything to taste and see that He is good, whether the answer comes today, next year, or on the other side of eternity.

Our church culture has often misdiagnosed the strength of those who wait on the Lord. We celebrate the instant miracle and quietly feel sorry for the person still waiting, as if their faith must be weaker. But very often the one still waiting is the one being trusted with more.

When you've been taught your whole life the value of instant faith without experiencing the power of enduring faith, you begin to see God as a genie.

A genie exists to grant wishes and make all your dreams come true. But God is a Divine Silversmith. A blacksmith pounds hot iron into shape with a hammer. A silversmith works with something precious. He sits by the fire and watches carefully, taking you through the Refiner's Fire because He wants to purify your character so you can reflect His glory. (We'll spend the whole next chapter in that fire.)

We trust what we know about Him more than what we feel in the moment. And what we know is that He keeps His word.

God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind. Has he ever spoken and failed to act? Has he ever promised and not carried it through?

Numbers 23:19

What He has planned for you, no man or demon can cancel.

Spiritual Surgery and Spiritual Rehabilitation

My son's leg gave me a picture I've used ever since. There is a tension many believers live in without having words for it:

- **Expedited healing.** Sometimes God's power moves faster than anyone expects. Within days, my son was doing what the timeline said should take much longer.
- **Divine delay.** Sometimes full restoration still follows a longer, non-negotiable process. Eleven months is eleven months.

In the same way, just because a problem has been addressed with spiritual surgery doesn't mean spiritual rehabilitation is finished.

Surgery happens in a moment. God can touch a wound, break a stronghold, or mend a broken heart in a single encounter. Spiritual surgery often feels less painful than the long road of spiritual rehabilitation, because rehab is slow, repetitive and humbling. A broken heart can be mended in a moment, but its complete healing often takes many seasons of waiting on the Lord.

Your pain is not a sign that your promise has been abandoned. Sometimes it's a sign that the healing has begun.

Often the hardest part isn't the rehab itself. It's the lack of understanding and empathy from people around you while you're still in it. They saw the surgery. They don't understand why you're still limping.

So give yourself grace to carry a spiritual limp as you walk through the process. Jacob walked away from his night of wrestling with God with a limp (Genesis 32:31). That limp was proof that he had been touched by God. Your limp is a testament to how serious the wound was, and to the power of the Divine Healer who is still at work.

Crushed Expectations During a Divine Delay

The prophet Habakkuk knew what it was to wait. He looked at the injustice around him and brought his complaint to God. Then he did something we rarely do. He stayed.

I will climb up to my watchtower and stand at my guardpost. There I will wait to see what the LORD says and how he will answer my complaint.

Habakkuk 2:1

God's answer, the verse at the top of this chapter, didn't remove the waiting. It told Habakkuk the waiting had a purpose: "If it seems slow in coming, wait patiently, for it will surely take place."

Bruce Wilkinson's little book *The Dream Giver* tells the parable of a character named Ordinary who leaves his comfortable home to follow a Big Dream. Somewhere in the middle of the WasteLand, he loses his way. He cries out for direction and hears nothing. Finally he sits on his suitcase and refuses to move until the Dream Giver shows up with a plan. When a sandstorm wipes out the path completely, Ordinary shouts at the sky that the Dream Giver is really a Dream Taker.

I've been Ordinary on that suitcase. Maybe you have too.

Some of us have held our dreams in our hands, only to watch them crushed by circumstances beyond our control. We raised our fists to God and questioned His goodness. But we were too wise in our own eyes to see that the crushing was only allowed to produce something that would last for eternity, not just for a brief season in this thing we call time. We were made for eternal pleasure with God, not the temporary pleasures of this world.

Remember how God led Israel out of Egypt. There was a road along the coast that was "the shortest route to the Promised Land," but God didn't take them that way. He knew that if they faced war too soon, they would turn around and run back to Egypt. So He led them "in a roundabout way through the wilderness" (Exodus 13:17-18). What looked like a delay was protection.

Sometimes the fastest road to your divine destiny is the path called the crushing.

If you are passing through the crucible of affliction, you are not off course. Some things in life can only be learned by being battle-tested and carrying your own personal cross.

But If Not

When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego stood in front of Nebuchadnezzar's furnace, they gave one of the greatest answers in Scripture:

If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

Daniel 3:17–18 (ESV)

But if not. Those three words are the heart of enduring faith. They had already decided that God was good before they knew how the story would end.

If you obey God based on a benefit or an outcome, you will often be disappointed. If you obey God based on His faithfulness and goodness, you will always be satisfied in the end, because it's through the process that you discover He is your true and great reward.

I've noticed something about the way we grow. In our twenties and thirties, we're mostly hoping God will change our external circumstances. By our forties and fifties, we begin to realize He has been trying to change our perspective on those circumstances all along. To understand God's plans for your life, you have to focus on eternity, not just your earthly plans.

Decide in advance that He is good and worthy of your yes, no matter what the outcome is.

Canon Events

In the animated movie *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*, there's an idea called a "canon event." It's a painful, defining moment that every version of Spider-Man has to go through, like Peter Parker losing his uncle. As terrible as those moments are, they're the events that turn an ordinary person into the hero he's meant to become.

It's only a movie, but it puts words to something real. There are seasons in our lives that feel unbearable, yet God uses them to give birth to who we're becoming.

There's an old saying: thieves don't break into empty houses. What if some of the attacks against your life have less to do with bad luck or God's unfaithfulness, and more to do with the value of what you carry? The devil often knows your name better than you do. He remembers his defeats at the hands of Job, Daniel, Noah, Joseph and Esther. What if he's afraid of who you are becoming, and he's launching an all-out assault to abort the anointing and authority God has placed on you?

The enemy means it for harm. But God, who never wastes a wound, can turn the very thing designed to stop you into the event that forms you.

From Promise to Promise Land

We love to talk about the promise. We rarely talk about everything that lies between the promise and the Promised Land. When I teach this, I often write it like this:

Promise – Purpose – Pain – Process – Promise Land

When people celebrate someone's achievements, they usually don't see the private struggles and crushing seasons that came before, or the ones that came after. If we don't tell people about the wilderness that comes with the promises of God, then when trials come, they'll start to doubt that the promise was ever true. We can't hold back the cost of discipleship out of fear that it will discourage people. Jesus promised purpose in our pain more than He promised prosperity.

Here's a fuller picture of that progression. I call it the 8 P's:

1. **Purpose.** "For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD (Jeremiah 29:11). God clarifies your purpose so you stop wandering aimlessly and start walking intentionally.
2. **Problem.** "I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt" (Exodus 3:7). God never ignores your problem. He allows it and uses it to move you out of comfort into His greater story.
3. **Pain.** "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed" (Psalm 34:18). Your deepest pain can become the place you experience His nearness most.
4. **Process.** Problems and trials "help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character" (Romans 5:3–4). God uses a deliberate, often long process to make you who you need to be for the promise.
5. **Pruning.** He "prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more" (John 15:2). Pruning feels like loss, but it's His loving removal of whatever hinders your fruitfulness.
6. **Power.** "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you" (Acts 1:8). After preparation comes the power that turns ordinary people into history makers.

7. **Promotion.** “Humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor” (1 Peter 5:6). Real promotion comes when God lifts the humble at the right time.
8. **Promise.** The Promise Land is the place where every word God spoke over your life comes to complete fulfillment.

Not a single one of all the good promises the LORD had given to the family of Israel was left unfulfilled; everything he had spoken came true.

Joshua 21:45

My son didn't get his eleven months back. But he did walk into the promise on the other side of them, stronger than he went in. I believe the same is true for you. Whatever surgery God has already done in your life, and whatever rehabilitation you're still walking through, He hasn't forgotten you. The vision is for an appointed time. It will not be late.

For the Road

1. Where in your life have you experienced instant faith, and where are you being asked to walk in enduring faith right now?
2. Is there a place where God has done spiritual surgery but you're still in spiritual rehabilitation? How can you give yourself grace for the limp?
3. Looking at the 8 P's, which stage do you think you're in? What would “but if not” faith look like for you there?

A delayed promise is still a divine promise, so keep walking, even if you're limping.

PART THREE

The Refiner's Fire

Why does God put His people in the fire?

The Refiner's Fire

Fire tests the purity of silver and gold, but the LORD tests the heart.

Proverbs 17:3

There's an old story often told about a silversmith.

Someone once watched him at work and asked how he knew when the silver was finished. He explained that refining silver means holding it in the hottest part of the fire, where the impurities burn away and rise to the surface so they can be skimmed off. He can't walk away while it's in the flames. Leave it too long and the silver is damaged. So he sits, and he watches, and he never takes his eyes off it.

"Then how do you know when it's done?"

"That's easy," he said. "When I can see my reflection in it."

I don't know if any silversmith ever actually said that. But I know the God the story points to. Like that silversmith, He sits beside the furnace, watching over something precious, waiting for the moment He sees His own image in you.

Every flame God allows is measured by a Father who is watching for His reflection in you.

Who Can Endure?

The prophet Malachi described the coming of the Lord with a question that ought to make all of us pause.

But who will be able to endure it when he comes? Who will be able to stand and face him when he appears? For he will be like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes. He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross. He will purify the Levites, refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the LORD.

Malachi 3:2-3

Notice the posture: “He will sit like a refiner of silver.” He doesn’t throw His people into the fire and leave. He sits down beside it. And notice the purpose: “so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices.” The goal of the fire is restored worship, a people whose lives are an offering God delights in.

God says it even more plainly through Isaiah:

I have refined you, but not as silver is refined. Rather, I have refined you in the furnace of suffering.

Isaiah 48:10

Just as the silversmith’s flames are meant to develop the metal and reveal its true value, God’s refining work in our trials is preparation, not punishment. The heat of adversity brings the dross to the surface. Pride, fear of man, greed, self-reliance: things we didn’t even know were in us float up where He can lift them out. What’s left reflects His holiness and character.

That’s why refinement requires trust. You have to believe the Refiner knows exactly how hot the fire should be and exactly how long you should stay in it.

The Refiner’s Fire Train

Some time ago, God showed me a picture I still carry with me.

I saw a train riding toward eternity, its engine blazing with holy fire. The Lord said, “This is My Refiner’s Fire train. It’s for those who want all of Me. No half-hearted riders.”

The passengers were the remnant, His end-times church. They climbed aboard with tears and cheers, ready to change the world. But as the train went on, the heat rose along with the cost of discipleship. Trials and disappointment seared their skin. Persecution and rejection rattled their bones. For many, the cost of following Christ became too great.

At first they sang, “We’ll follow the Lamb wherever He leads!” But fear and doubt crept in. “Why does it hurt so much?” some cried. “Why have we lost so many friends and loved ones along the way? We’re serving God at all cost, and all we get is the short end of the stick.”

Then the train pulled into a stop, a city called Comfort, Compromise, and Convenience. A crowd stumbled off, gasping, “This isn’t what we signed up for!

Where's the prosperity and blessing? Where's the easy victory?"

The Divine Conductor stepped down. His voice was gentle but unyielding. "You say you love Me, but you run from My purifying fire. Don't you know I am an all-consuming fire? To know Me is to burn with My zeal and passion. To follow Me is to deny yourself and pick up your cross."

Then He turned to the passengers who remained. Their faces were weary and their hands were tired, but their eyes were fixed on Him. "You are the ones I've written in My scroll of remembrance," He said. "You are My treasured possession."

Some of those who had gotten off glanced back, weighed down by shame. A few crawled back on, whispering, "We'll choose the Refiner's fire over the temporary pleasures of this world." Others hardened their hearts and went chasing shadows of safety and worldly dreams.

Inside the train, the faithful huddled together and bandaged one another's wounds. "Remember the early church?" one of them said. "They shared everything, even their pain." The flames of persecution melted their pride, their greed and their fear of man, until nothing remained but raw, desperate love for Jesus. "Don't quit now," they urged each other. "The pain is purifying us!"

When the train reached the edge of heaven, the Divine Conductor flung the doors open. Light exploded, and every tear and every sacrifice made sense. "Welcome home," He said. "You didn't just ride the Refiner's Fire. You endured it, and it became a fire of passion within you. My fire was never here to punish you. It was here to consume and purify you, to make you dangerous to the kingdom of darkness."

I've thought about that city many times. Comfort, Compromise, and Convenience is a very popular stop.

Comfort says, "I'll follow Jesus as long as it doesn't hurt." Compromise says, "I'll follow Jesus, but I'll keep a little of the world on the side, just in case." Convenience says, "I'll follow Jesus when it fits my schedule." None of them sound like open rebellion. They sound reasonable, and that's exactly why the platform is so crowded. Nobody who stepped off that train thought they were walking away from God. They just thought the ride had gotten too hot.

Here's what struck me most. The Conductor didn't chase them down the platform with condemnation, and He didn't cool the engine to keep them on board. He told

them the truth about who He is, an all-consuming fire, and let them choose. And the ones who crawled back on, ashamed as they were, rode the rest of the way home.

Too many of us want a Jesus who heals our wounds without asking us to pick up our cross and trust Him.

We want revival without repentance, power without persecution, and a crown without a cross.

But the people the Conductor called His treasured possession were the ones who stayed on the train when it got hot.

Judge Me Now

Malachi's question "Who will be able to endure it when he comes?" is about more than our trials. It's about judgment. One day every one of us will stand before a holy God. The fire is coming either way. The only question is when we'll face it.

That truth has changed the way I pray.

I would rather face the Refiner's fire of trials, persecution and discipline on this side of eternity than the fire of judgment when it's too late to repent.

So I've learned to pray something that sounds strange at first: "Lord, judge me now." Show me the sin I can't see. Expose my personal deception while there's still time to turn. Burn away whatever won't survive eternity anyway.

It may sound morbid, but it's the prayer of someone who wants to know Him more than they want to be comfortable. Paul prayed it this way:

I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death.

Philippians 3:10

Every believer is called to deny themselves by crucifying sinful desires (Matthew 16:24; Galatians 5:24). But I believe God also assigns each of us a custom cross: trials like persecution, loss, crushing or brokenness that we would never have chosen. Jesus told Peter that one day others would lead him where he didn't want to go (John 21:18–19). These specific burdens purify pride, test our loyalty and forge our reliance on Christ. Self-denial rejects the flesh. The Refiner's fire burns away everything but eternal purpose, until we share in both His sufferings and His glory (Romans 8:17–18).

Did I Curse Myself?

A few years ago a friend introduced me to a worship song by Maverick City Music called “Refiner.” Little did I know how prophetic that song was going to be in my life. It’s a prayer to be tried by fire, purified, and made into a living sacrifice. I sang it over and over.

Not long after, someone asked me a real question, and I’ve heard versions of it many times since: “Did I curse myself by singing ‘Refiner’?”

I understand the fear behind it. You sing a song inviting the fire, and then your life catches fire. It’s easy to wonder if you brought it on yourself.

Here’s what I believe. Some songs sound good but aren’t biblical, so the first question is always whether Scripture backs up what we’re singing. In this case it does. David prayed nearly the same prayer:

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

Psalms 139:23-24

So do we really think God is in heaven thinking, “Good, they prayed the prayer of refinement and purification. Now I can zap them?”

Or is He saying, “Do you see My faithful servant praying for refinement? They fully trust My ways even when they don’t understand them?”

God delights in the people who trust Him enough to ask Him to refine them.

I’ll be honest. There have been seasons since I started praying that way when I had no idea what I was doing. But He has always found me.

Refinement is an invitation to intimacy. Jesus Himself said, “I have come to set the world on fire, and I wish it were already burning!” (Luke 12:49). There’s a story often told about John Wesley, that when someone asked why so many came to hear him preach, he said that God set him on fire and people came to watch him burn. Whether or not he ever said it, it’s true of anyone who has been through the Refiner’s fire. On the road to Emmaus, after Jesus opened the Scriptures to two discouraged disciples, they said to each other, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32).

The fire that refines us is the same fire that makes our hearts burn for Him.

The Promise Called the Refiner's Fire

We've been told a lot about the promise of prosperity. We hear far less about the promise of the Refiner's fire, even though Scripture is full of it. Here are a few of the passages I come back to most.

I will bring that group through the fire and make them pure. I will refine them like silver and purify them like gold. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, "These are my people," and they will say, "The LORD is our God."

Zechariah 13:9

Refinement leads to relationship. On the other side of the fire is a people who call on Him and a God who answers, "These are My people."

You have tested us, O God; you have purified us like silver. You captured us in your net and laid the burden of slavery on our backs. Then you put a leader over us. We went through fire and flood, but you brought us to a place of great abundance.

Psalms 66:10-12

The psalmist doesn't pretend the fire and flood were pleasant. But he also doesn't stop there. The fire led somewhere.

I will raise my fist against you. I will melt you down and skim off your slag. I will remove all your impurities.

Isaiah 1:25

The very next verse says that afterward Jerusalem would be called "the Faithful City." God removes the impurities so He can restore what they were hiding.

Many will be purified, cleansed, and refined by these trials. But the wicked will continue in their wickedness, and none of them will understand. Only those who are wise will know what it means.

Daniel 12:10

The same trial produces two very different people. Some are purified. Others only harden. Wisdom is understanding what the fire is for. And a couple of verses earlier,

Daniel was told what becomes of those who understand: they “will shine as bright as the sky” (Daniel 12:3).

Therefore, this is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says: “See, I will melt them down in a crucible and test them like metal. What else can I do with my people?”

Jeremiah 9:7

Listen to the heartbreak in that last question. This is a Father who has tried everything else. The crucible is what love does when it refuses to give up on His people.

Though the Lord gave you adversity for food and suffering for drink, he will still be with you to teach you. You will see your teacher with your own eyes. Your own ears will hear him. Right behind you a voice will say, “This is the way you should go,” whether to the right or to the left.

Isaiah 30:20-21

This one is especially precious to me. Adversity was on the menu, but so was the Teacher. In the fire, His voice becomes clearer, not quieter.

What Are You Willing to Suffer For?

Here’s something I’ve come to believe.

We are not afraid of the crushing itself. We are afraid of being crushed for things we don’t value. People suffer all the time for the things they love. They train through pain, sacrifice sleep, and give up comfort for a degree, a body, a career, a championship.

Show me what someone is willing to suffer for, and I’ll show you what that person values.

If Jesus is truly the treasure in the field, then the fire is a price worth paying to know Him. If He isn’t, then every trial will feel like a betrayal, and the city of Comfort, Compromise, and Convenience will start to look like home.

Whatever you’re walking through right now, the cross you didn’t choose or the fire you didn’t ask for, it can become a divine training room. The Refiner’s fire is preparing you to fulfill your purpose in your generation, so that one day you will hear

the words every one of us longs for: “Well done, my good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21).

Nobody hears those words at the end of a life spent in the city of Comfort, Compromise, and Convenience. They’re spoken over people who stayed on the train. People who let the heat do its work. People who kept their eyes on the Conductor even when their hands were tired and their faces were weary.

So let me ask you what I’ve had to ask myself. Do we just want to sing about the Refiner’s fire, or are we willing to be consumed by it?

The Refiner is sitting beside the furnace right now. He hasn’t taken His eyes off you for a second. He knows exactly how hot the fire is and exactly how long you’ve been in it. And He’s waiting for the moment He looks down and sees His own face looking back.

For the Road

1. In the train vision, what does the city of Comfort, Compromise, and Convenience look like in your life? What tempts you to get off the train?
2. Have you ever been afraid to pray for refinement? What does Psalm 139:23–24 tell you about the heart behind that prayer?
3. What impurities do you sense the Refiner bringing to the surface in this season, and what might He be restoring underneath them?

The Refiner never leaves the fire, and He won’t stop until He sees His reflection in you.

The Fires the Remnant Will Face

And some of the wise will fall victim to persecution. In this way, they will be refined and cleansed and made pure until the time of the end, for the appointed time is still to come.

Daniel 11:35

Walk out into a wheat field late in the season and you'll notice something. The good grain is bent over. The heads are heavy, full of what the farmer planted, and the weight pulls them toward the ground.

The weeds look almost the same, especially early on. But the weeds stand straight up. There's nothing in them heavy enough to make them bow.

I see in that field a picture of the Church in the last days. For a long season it can be hard to tell the difference between what God planted and what the enemy sowed. Both grow in the same soil. Both get the same rain. Both may sit in the same pew and sing the same songs. Then the fire of the harvest season comes, and what was hidden in the heart becomes visible.

This chapter is about that fire: the refining fire God allows to come upon His people at the end of the age, the fires that will separate the remnant from the crowd. It's a different fire from judgment, and it comes from a Father's hand.

The People Who Know Their God

Daniel saw a day when a ruthless ruler would rise, flatter those who had broken covenant with God, and win them over. But Daniel also saw another group of people:

But the people who know their God will be strong and will resist him. Wise leaders will give instruction to many, but these teachers will die by fire and sword, or they will be jailed and robbed. During these persecutions, little help will arrive, and many who join them will not be sincere.

Daniel 11:32-34

Notice what Daniel says the fire does. “In this way, they will be refined and cleansed and made pure” (Daniel 11:35). The persecution doesn’t destroy the people who know their God. It purifies them.

That’s what I mean by the remnant. The remnant is not a club of super-Christians who think they’re better than everyone else. The remnant is simply the people who still know their God when the cost of knowing Him goes up.

Many believers don’t realize that the end-times story is centered on this very challenge: keeping faith in the middle of persecution, delayed justice, the prosperity of the wicked and a rising tide of evil on the earth. Many will grow weary as the wicked accumulate wealth and seem to prosper. They’ll start asking what the point of serving God is, especially as they watch their personal dreams shipwreck. Compromised shepherds and false prophets will lead many astray with false hopes rooted in humanism.

But those who remain steadfast will be saved. That’s why perseverance, discernment and living for eternity matter so much right now.

The remnant will feel the heat like everyone else. They just keep knowing their God in it.

Wheat and Tare Season

Jesus told a story about a farmer who planted good seed. While everyone slept, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. When the workers discovered it, they wanted to rip the weeds out right away. The farmer stopped them: “No, you’ll uproot the wheat if you do” (Matthew 13:29). His instruction was to let both grow together until the harvest (Matthew 13:30), and then sort them out.

Until the harvest, it isn’t always possible to distinguish wheat from tares. Tares resemble wheat, but wheat nourishes and tares poison. And as I said, mature wheat bows low while the tares stay standing upright.

Maturity makes the true gifts of God more humble. Immaturity makes gifts more proud.

There’s something else in that parable I don’t want you to miss. The farmer wouldn’t let his workers pull the weeds because the roots were tangled together. Sometimes the very things we beg God to remove from our lives are wrapped around something He’s

growing in us. If you uproot the weeds too early, you may uproot what you need for your destiny.

Some time ago I sensed the Lord saying that the harvest of the wheat and the tares had come to full maturity. I heard Him say He was redefining family, uniting those who had not been overcome by the spirit of offense through a long wilderness season. Those who chose lukewarm affection would be cast away, but many who had been prodigals in their hearts would find their way back home to His heart. Whenever I think I'm hearing the Lord, I look for Scripture to bear witness, and this one lines up with what Jesus said about the end of the age. The harvest is the season when what is real is revealed.

When Love Grows Cold

Jesus told His disciples plainly what the last days would feel like.

And many false prophets will appear and will deceive many people. Sin will be rampant everywhere, and the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Matthew 24:11-13

The Amplified Bible, Classic Edition, speaks of “multiplied lawlessness and iniquity.” Think about the words that sit close to *lawlessness*: injustice, anarchy, rebellion, disorder, chaos, a lack of restraint. When those things multiply, the love of many grows cold.

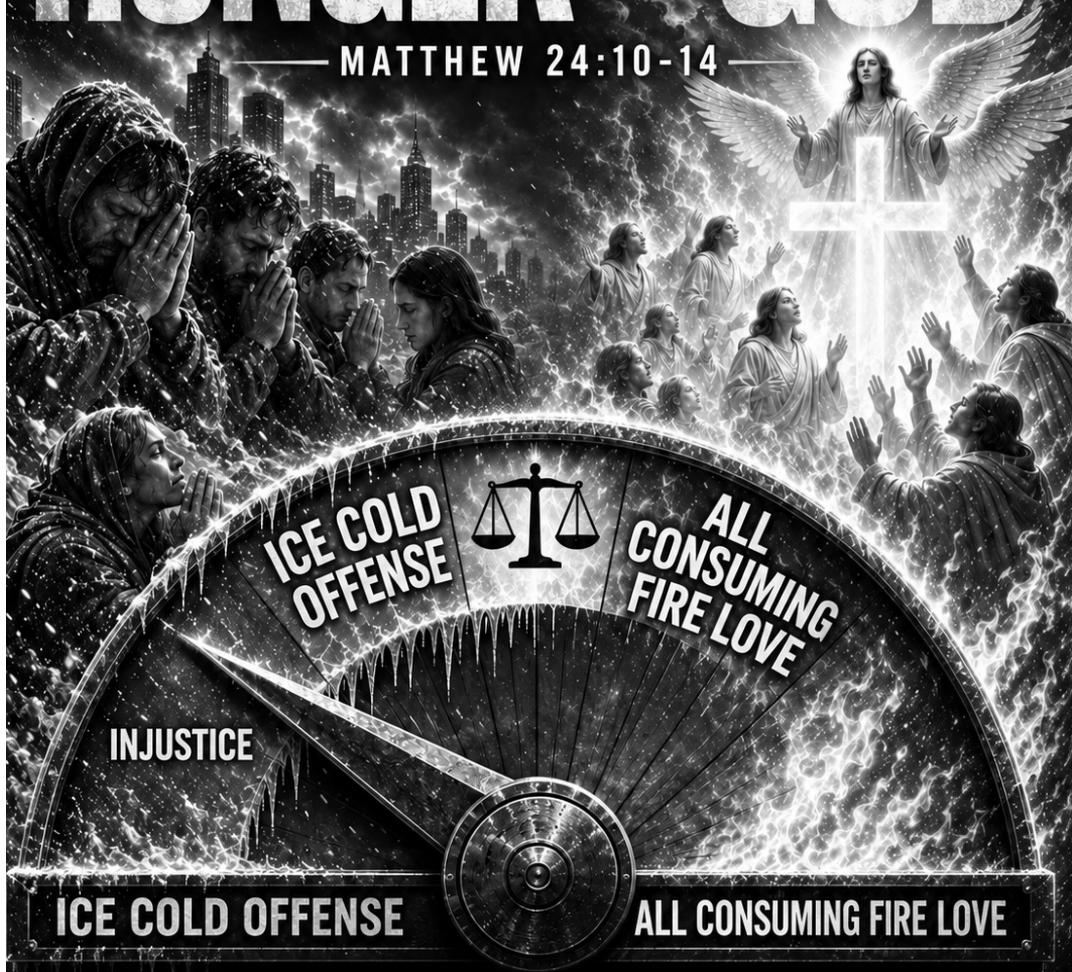
A cold or hardened heart usually comes from one of three places: offense, disbelief or disobedience. People may obey God at first. But when promises are delayed, or when the pressure lets up and they no longer feel their need for Him, they can drift right back into rebellion.

In this season, many believers' hearts may grow cold because of injustice and divine delays, as the wicked seem to prosper and the righteous suffer. That will reveal who is truly committed to God's heart and who never saw His love as the reward of the gospel. Those who trust in His goodness will stay strong and overcome bitterness, offense and deception. The lukewarm will trade their inheritance for temporary pleasures and the praise of people.

Cold love is rarely a sudden decision. It's a fire nobody tended.

HUNGER FOR GOD

— MATTHEW 24:10-14 —



THE LOVE METER GROWS COLD...

The Seven Fires

So what are the fires the remnant will face? I want to name seven. I name them not to frighten you but to prepare you, because a fire you were warned about is far less likely to make you quit. As you read, some of these may not be theories for you. They may be your life right now. If so, please hear me: being in one of these fires is not proof that God has left you. It may be proof that He is refining you.

1. Lack of Justice.

God's heart has always been for the oppressed. "Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows" (Isaiah 1:17). He requires us "to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). In the last days, rampant injustice will become a refining fire that makes God's people hunger for His righteousness, and moves them to stand against corruption with His heart for the forgotten.

2. Persecution.

Jesus never hid this one. "Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you" (John 15:20). But He also said, "God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs" (Matthew 5:10). Persecution is the furnace that proves our faith is genuine, "tested as fire tests and purifies gold" (1 Peter 1:7). As hostility grows, God strips His Church of worldly dependence and forms witnesses who cling to Christ alone.

3. Wealth and Prosperity of the Wicked.

The psalmist admitted, "For I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness" (Psalm 73:3). Jeremiah brought the same complaint to God: "Why are the wicked so prosperous? Why are evil people so happy?" (Jeremiah 12:1). Watching corrupt people thrive while you obey and struggle is its own kind of refiner's fire. It exposes impatience, envy, fear and shallow faith, and it builds endurance for deeper obedience. The psalmist only found peace when he went into God's sanctuary and saw things from eternity's side (Psalm 73:16-17). Materialism will lure many away from the truth in these days (1 Timothy 6:9-10), but this fire teaches us to store up treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:20).

The real test is whether the righteous stay faithful when justice feels delayed and obedience costs something.

4. Dreams Denied.

“You can make many plans, but the Lord’s purpose will prevail” (Proverbs 19:21). Few things hurt like watching a dream you were sure came from God fall apart. But shattered dreams refine our trust in His sovereignty. In the last days, unmet desires will press God’s people to surrender to His higher purpose and anchor their hope in His eternal promises rather than their own timelines.

5. Division in Family.

Jesus quoted the prophet Micah when He warned that following Him would divide households: “Your enemies will be right in your own household!” (Matthew 10:36; Micah 7:6). This may be the most painful fire on the list, because it burns closest to home. It tests our loyalties and refines us to put Christ above everything. Even here, our posture is not to fight our families but to love them, pray for them, and trust God for reconciliation.

6. Breakdown of Marriages.

Marriage is a covenant, and Malachi shows that the Lord sees covenant-breaking as cruelty against the one who should have been protected (Malachi 2:16). As our culture rejects God’s design, broken marriages will multiply. If you’ve walked through a divorce, please don’t read this as a verdict on you. Many of you were the one who was left. God sees you, and His grace is bigger than your story. This fire calls all of us to guard our covenants, honor our vows, and love Christ above even our most sacred relationships.

7. Growth of Sexual Perversion.

Paul warned that “in the last days there will be very difficult times,” when people will “love pleasure rather than God” and “act religious” while rejecting the power that could make them godly (2 Timothy 3:1–5). As the culture runs further from God’s design for sexuality and marriage, the remnant will feel the heat of holding to biblical conviction. But we must hold it the way Paul did. Right after listing the sins that keep people out of the Kingdom, he wrote, “Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11). Every one of us needed that washing. Our conviction must sound like an invitation, not a sneer.

Revival Looks Like Rebellion

There's a reason the remnant often feels misunderstood, even by other believers. To people bound by a religious spirit, revival and reformation look like rebellion.

Martin Luther couldn't go ask the church of his day for permission to start the Reformation. On his way to the Diet of Worms in 1521, his great concern was not whether he would return home alive. It was whether he would confess the truth when he stood before the church authorities and the emperor. He feared he might crumble and give in. He was tormented by questions like "Are you the only wise man?" and "What if you're leading all these people to hell with you?" Luther was convinced that his struggle with despair was not simply part of his personality but an attack of the enemy, trying to rob him of the joy and the mission God had given him.

Out of that fire came what Luther called the theology of the cross: the conviction that we truly know God through the cross we are called to carry, by becoming like Jesus in His rejection and suffering. He said it this way:

"Living, even dying and being damned, make a theologian, not understanding, reading, or speculating."

Martin Luther

You don't learn the theology of the cross in a lecture. You learn it on the road to Worms.

Seven Subcategories of Refinement

Not every refining season feels the same. Here are seven ways I've seen God refine His people. You may recognize your current season in one of them.

1. **The Crushing.** "Unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone" (John 12:24). Crushing dismantles self-reliance and breaks pride and worldly attachments, so humility and eternal fruit can be born. And in it, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted" (Psalm 34:18).
2. **Deconstruction.** In seasons when we struggle to trust God's promises, He dismantles lies, false identities and worldly systems, and rebuilds us on Christ alone. "Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person" (2 Corinthians 5:17).
3. **Collateral Beauty.** God brings out beauty that could not exist without the disappointment and pain, giving "a crown of beauty for ashes" (Isaiah 61:3). We'll

spend a whole chapter on this later.

4. **Refiner's Fire.** "I will refine them like silver and purify them like gold. They will call on my name, and I will answer them" (Zechariah 13:9). Trials become divine training that purges impurities and burns away sin, so we reflect the holiness of Christ.
5. **Dark Night of the Soul.** "You have thrown me into the lowest pit, into the darkest depths" (Psalm 88:6). God sometimes uses silence and isolation to wean us from emotional dependencies and deepen a radical, unwavering faith.
6. **Beyond the Breaking.** "After you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you" (1 Peter 5:10). Brokenness becomes the birthplace of purpose. God doesn't reassemble us into our former selves but into His eternal design.
7. **The Right and Almost Right Test.** This one needs a little more space.

The Right and Almost Right Test

There's a line often attributed to Charles Spurgeon that I think about constantly: discernment is not a matter of telling right from wrong, but right from almost right.

God will often test your allegiance and discernment not with something obviously evil, but by allowing something that looks almost right. As the saying goes, new levels bring new devils. The almost-right thing can carry the language of promise, the appearance of favor, even a form of godliness. What it lacks is God's authenticity and His timing.

Scripture is full of these tests:

- **Ishmael** was born through human effort to fulfill a divine promise, but he was not the promise itself (Genesis 16).
- **The Gibeonites** looked humble and far away, but they were deceptive. "So the Israelites examined their food, but they did not consult the Lord" (Joshua 9:14).
- **A lying spirit in the mouths of the prophets** was permitted by God and received as truth by a king who wanted confirmation more than obedience (1 Kings 22:22–23).
- **Satan quoted Scripture to Jesus** in the wilderness, using truth out of context to tempt and redirect Him (Matthew 4:6).

The danger isn't always obvious, because the natural mind can't grasp the things of God; they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14). The Word of God and the Spirit of Truth separate what is born of soulish desire from what is born of the will of God.

Not everything that resembles God is from God.

I'm not saying this to make you paranoid. I'm calling you to spiritual sobriety: refusing to be wise in your own eyes, seeking the Lord, and listening to wise counsel. That's where discernment gets refined. Will you wait for what God actually said, or settle for what looks close enough?

Almost right can still take you completely off course.

A Hundredfold, With Persecutions

Peter once reminded Jesus that the disciples had left everything to follow Him. Jesus' answer is one of the most beautiful promises in the gospels, and one of the most honest.

"Yes," Jesus replied, "and I assure you that everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for my sake and for the Good News, will receive now in return a hundred times as many houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property—along with persecution. And in the world to come that person will have eternal life."

Mark 10:29-30

We love to quote the hundredfold part. We usually skip the last three words of the sentence.

This promise was never a materialistic one. The hundredfold is the inheritance of the Kingdom: being adopted into the family of God and the community of believers, where people share what they have (Acts 4:32-35) and where whoever does the will of God becomes our brother, sister and mother (Mark 3:35). That new family, bound together by grace, is real and it is rich.

But Jesus balanced the promise with a warning. Persecution is inevitable for anyone who lives against the patterns and values of this world. The reward is both present and eternal, but it is not convenient or comfortable. And the fellowship of Christ's

sufferings keeps proving that true abundance is found in union with Him, even in the middle of trials.

So when the fires come, and they will, don't be surprised and don't give up. "So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up" (Galatians 6:9). The fire is not the end of your story. It's how the Refiner gets you ready for the harvest.

For the Road

1. Which of the seven fires feels closest to you right now? What would it look like to see it as refining rather than abandonment?
2. Where has your love for God or for people started to grow cold? What offense, disbelief or delay might be behind it?
3. Is there an "almost right" opportunity in front of you? What did God actually say, and are you willing to wait for it?

Let the fire make you bow lower. Mature wheat always does.

Refinement or Recalculation?

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

If you've ever missed a turn while following the map app on your phone, you know the voice. It doesn't yell at you. It doesn't call you a failure. It simply says, "Recalculating," and starts plotting a new way to get you where you were going.

But the road you're on afterward may be longer. And from the driver's seat, a long, hard road can feel exactly the same whether you're on it because the route was always meant to go through the mountains or because you missed your exit three miles back.

That's the question of this chapter. When I'm in pain, how do I know whether I'm in the Refiner's fire or in a recalculation? Is God refining me through something I didn't cause, or is He rerouting me after choices I made?

Those two seasons can feel almost identical. Both involve change, growth and reorientation. Both come with setbacks. But they come from different places and call for different responses, and confusing them can keep us stuck for years.

What's the Source of My Pain?

We can't simply equate bad things with bad behavior and good things with good behavior. Job's friends tried that, and God rebuked them for it. So before we ask what to do with our pain, it helps to ask where it might be coming from. Here are seven sources I've seen in Scripture and in life.

1. **God's Discipline.** Sometimes the pain is a Father's correction, meant to bring us back to the right path. It's never pleasant at the time, but it yields "a peaceful harvest of right living" (Hebrews 12:11). His discipline is proof of His love.
2. **Divine Training.** Sometimes there's no sin to confess at all. God is building endurance, the way a coach trains an athlete for a season that hasn't started yet.

Even Jesus, who never sinned, “learned obedience from the things he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8).

3. Winter Season, Where Things Die. “For everything there is a season... A time to be born and a time to die” (Ecclesiastes 3:1–2). A winter can feel like loss or stagnation, but it’s often a season of necessary pruning that clears the way for new growth.

4. Spiritual Warfare. “For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world” (Ephesians 6:12). Not all pain comes from our failures. Some of it comes from an enemy, and the right response is to stand firm in the armor of God.

5. Collateral Damage. Sometimes we get hurt by other people’s poor decisions. It’s unfair and it’s disheartening. But like Joseph, whose brothers meant him harm, we can watch God redeem what others did to us, and we can stay hopeful and forgiving while He does.

6. We Live in a Fallen World. “For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Romans 8:22). Sickness, disasters and injustice are part of life on a broken planet. They’re real, and they’re also temporary in light of eternity.

7. Your Testimony Can Equip Current and Future Saints. This one is less a source than a purpose that can grow out of any of the others. What you walk through can become the comfort and courage someone else needs later. We’ll come back to that near the end of the book.

Most seasons of pain have more than one of these in the mix. The goal isn’t to diagnose every hurt perfectly. The goal is to stop assuming the worst about God, and to stay honest about ourselves.

Trusting God Behind the Scenes

Was this the enemy attacking me, God refining me, the consequence of someone’s choices, or the pain of living in a fallen world?

Sometimes we can recognize what is happening. Other times, we may carry those questions into eternity. Our journey with God requires trust even when we cannot see what is happening behind the scenes.

Consider Job. As readers, we are allowed to see a conversation in heaven that Job could not hear. He experienced the loss, the grief, and the confusion without access to that explanation. His friends were certain they knew why he was suffering. Their certainty did not make them right.

When God finally spoke, He did not walk Job through the heavenly conversation. He revealed His greatness, wisdom, and care for a creation far beyond Job's understanding. Job's questions were met by an encounter with the One he could trust.

We do not have to understand everything happening around us to remain faithful to the God who walks with us.

An attack and a refining work are not always mutually exclusive. The enemy can intend something for our destruction while God works within that same circumstance to deepen our faith. God's ability to redeem suffering does not make the evil good or excuse the person who caused it. It means evil does not have the final authority over what our lives can become.

This is why we must be careful when explaining someone else's crushing. We may see their circumstances without knowing their story, and we certainly do not see everything happening in heaven. Before offering an explanation, we can sit beside them, listen, pray, and help carry the burden.

Trust leaves room for tears, questions, and lament. It also leaves room to resist evil, seek help, and step away from harm. We can do all of those things while entrusting what we cannot understand to God.

Some answers may come with time. Others may remain hidden throughout this life. Until then, we can keep bringing our pain to the Father, obeying what He has made clear, and trusting Him with what He has not explained.

I may not know everything happening behind the scenes, but I can trust the character of the God who sees it all.

Discipline Means Training

For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child.

Hebrews 12:6

That word discipline scares a lot of people. Many of us grew up with earthly discipline that was harsh, angry or unpredictable, so when we read that God disciplines us, we picture a Father who is fed up with us.

But the Greek word behind "discipline" in Hebrews 12 is all about raising and training a child. When I read verse 6, I hear it this way: the Lord trains those He loves.

The writer of Hebrews makes the comparison himself. Our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. “But God’s discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness” (Hebrews 12:10). He is never venting frustration. He is always forming sons and daughters.

God training you and God disciplining you are not always the same thing, but both come from the same love.

Sometimes it’s discipline: a response to rebellion, meant to turn us around. Sometimes it’s training: no rebellion at all, just a Father preparing us for what’s ahead. In both cases, He isn’t trying to subdue us. He’s trying to make us useful, healthy and free.

I’ve found that the fire of God’s presence is the divine pain of His instruction. If we truly trust Him, we’ll embrace both the rod of His protection and the staff of His discipline.

God trains us to give us a new heart.

The Lie of the Garden

To understand why discipline is sometimes needed, we have to go back to the beginning.

The serpent’s strategy in Eden was to make Eve believe that God was holding something good back from her. “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). Eating from that tree was humanity’s declaration of independence. We decided we would determine good and evil for ourselves.

I call that the sin of independence. It grows out of the belief that God is holding out on us, and it produces pride and self-reliance. But God knows the end from the beginning, and we don’t. When we take the wheel, we lack the perspective to judge rightly, and the result is confusion and destruction.

Scripture is blunt about where self-reliance leads:

This is what the Lord says: “Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans, who rely on human strength and turn their hearts away from the Lord. They are like stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future.”

Jeremiah 17:5–6

“Those who trust their own insight are foolish,” says Proverbs 28:26, “but anyone who walks in wisdom is safe.”

So much of God’s discipline is aimed right here. It’s meant to bring us to the end of our independent nature and back to the dependence we were created for. The pain is real, but what it produces is good: a heart that is repentant, softened and humbled by His correction.

Let contentment rule your heart rather than being consumed by what you think your good Father is holding back from you.

The Refiner’s Fire or a Self-Induced Wilderness

Here’s where honesty matters most. It’s easy to assume our ways are blameless before God and that all our affliction is the hammer of injustice. Sometimes it is. But sometimes we’re in the fire because of unwise decisions we made or orphan mindsets we still carry.

David knew what that felt like:

When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long. Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat. Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, “I will confess my rebellions to the Lord.” And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone.

Psalms 32:3–5

Then the Lord answers him: “I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you. Do not be like a senseless horse or mule that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control” (Psalm 32:8–9).

Let me lay the two seasons side by side.

Refinement: The Crushing.

Refinement comes through trials and suffering that God allows to test and strengthen our faith and character. It's usually involuntary; we didn't cause it. Its purpose is to purify faith, develop perseverance, remove impurities and prepare us for greater responsibility. Job is the great example: he suffered not because of his wrongdoing but as a test of his faith, and he came out knowing God more deeply.

Recalculation: Why Revival Tarries.

Recalculation happens when we realize we've drifted from God's path through disobedience, unbelief or unwise decisions. It requires a conscious decision to change direction, correct mistakes and realign with His will. Its purpose is to correct course, learn from the past instead of repeating it, recover lost time, and enter the fullness of His promises. Israel in the wilderness is the great example. A trip from Mount Sinai to Kadesh-barnea that takes eleven days (Deuteronomy 1:2) became forty years, because a generation would not trust and obey.

Both seasons involve change. Both are hard and require perseverance. Both, if we respond rightly, lead to a deeper relationship with God and greater maturity. The difference is this: refinement is enduring what we did not cause, and recalculation is owning what we did.

In refinement, you endure the fire. In recalculation, you turn around.

So how do you tell which one you're in? Start with a few honest questions, and ask them in God's presence, not in your own head. Is there a clear instruction from God I have ignored or delayed? Is there sin I have refused to confess, the way David did before he finally broke? Am I reaping what I planted, or am I suffering for doing what is right? Have the people who love me and walk with God been trying to tell me something I keep brushing off?

If the honest answer is no, take heart. You may be in the Refiner's fire, and your job is to endure, trust and let Him finish His work. If the answer is yes, take heart too. You have something you can actually do today: confess, turn and take the next right step.

The prophet Ezekiel heard God describe a people who blamed Him for their own detours: "Your people are saying, 'The Lord isn't doing what's right,' but it is they who are not doing what's right" (Ezekiel 33:17). Before we accuse God of injustice, we should at least ask whether we've missed an exit.

And if you have, hear the good news in that voice from the map app. Recalculating is not rejecting. God doesn't throw away the trip. He finds you a new route home. A good and faithful Father would never ask you to do something you could not do with His help, including "You must be holy because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16).

We Are Not as Righteous as We Think

There's a passage in Isaiah that humbles me every time I read it.

Yes, I will tell you of things that are entirely new, things you never heard of before. For I know so well what traitors you are. You have been rebels from birth. Yet for my own sake and for the honor of my name, I will hold back my anger and not wipe you out.

Isaiah 48:8-9

Right after that, God says He has refined His people "in the furnace of suffering" (Isaiah 48:10), and then: "I will rescue you for my sake—yes, for my own sake! I will not let my reputation be tarnished, and I will not share my glory with idols!" (Isaiah 48:11).

We are not as wise, strong or righteous as we imagine. Pride blinds us, and being wise in our own eyes hardens us to correction. Our self-will convinces us we see clearly, when our hearts are constantly building idols, subtle altars to our desires, ambitions and control. So we resist the very thing we most need.

God, in His mercy, doesn't leave us in that delusion. The furnace exposes what we would never surrender on our own. It strips away the illusion of self-sufficiency and confronts the false god of "my will be done."

It humbles our pride and brings us back to the posture we were created for, the posture of Jesus in the garden: "I want your will to be done, not mine" (Luke 22:42).

The fire is mercy. It dethrones the idol of self.

The Death of Self-Confidence

Paul, of all people, knew what it was to come to the end of himself.

We think you ought to know, dear brothers and sisters, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead.

2 Corinthians 1:8-9

Despite popular opinion, God will give you more than you can handle. He wants you in over your head. Not because He's cruel, but because that's where real life begins, when you stop relying on yourself and start relying on the God who raises the dead.

So many people never live up to their potential, or quit too early, because they believe the lie that they're only called to do what they can accomplish with their own gifts and talents. Beloved, you were never called to live a life limited by your own strength.

Rick Joyner once described a vision in which the Lord told him it was good for him to lose confidence in himself, but warned that losing self-confidence only produces insecurity unless the empty space is filled with confidence in God. That's the whole point. The fire doesn't leave a hole. It makes room.

What many people call their personal cross or thorn is really a reminder that they are not the hero of the story. It's also a divine training room, preparing you to fulfill your purpose in your generation, so that one day you may hear, "Well done, my good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21).

Brokenness brings us to the end of self, and that's exactly where God begins.

Correction Is Not Rejection

If you're in a season of discipline right now, I need you to hear this as clearly as anything in this book.

Correction is not rejection.

"As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father?" (Hebrews 12:7). The very fact that He's correcting you proves that you belong to Him. Fathers don't train children they've given up on.

Rick Joyner has pointed out that Peter says we are distressed by various trials "if necessary" (1 Peter 1:6, NASB). Not every crisis has to come. Before the Lord allows a

crisis, He often sends a clear warning so we can judge ourselves first. If we will repent and lay aside the sin that entangles us, some fires simply won't be needed.

But when the fire does come, don't run from the One holding the furnace. As the saying goes, God does His deepest work in our darkest hours. Whether you're being refined or recalculated, the destination hasn't changed. He's still bringing you home, and He's still making you like His Son on the way.

For the Road

1. Look at the seven sources of pain. Which ones are in the mix of your current season?
2. Is there any part of your hardship that comes from a turn you didn't take? What would "recalculating" look like for you this week?
3. Where have you been relying on your own strength? How might God be using this season to fill that space with confidence in Him?

Whether it's refinement or recalculation, the Father who corrects you has not rejected you.

PART FOUR

Divine Training

How does a Father train His sons and daughters?

God's Divine Weight Room

All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize.

1 Corinthians 9:25

"There is no light at the end of the tunnel."

I heard those words during my first NFL training camp. They came from my first head coach, a legendary coach whose camps were known as the toughest and most intimidating in the league. It was a make-or-break environment. Only the healthy players, or the ones who knew how to endure pain and recover quickly from injuries, would secure a spot on the team.

He didn't say it to crush us. He said it to test us. He was always measuring a player's psychological resilience, looking for mental toughness. I was thankful to be paired with a veteran I'll call Ambrose, who pulled me aside early and warned me about the coach's mind games. So instead of being discouraged when I heard that line, I understood the strategy behind it.

That didn't make the camp easy. For eight weeks I questioned his approach. Were the sacrifices and the pain really worth it? What if I didn't make the team? Was this level of intensity truly necessary? Those doubts followed me onto the field every morning and into bed every night.

Little did I know that I would not only make the team, but that enduring those tests would strengthen my will and my grit, elevate my play, and earn me respect from people in the front office. Most importantly, it prepared me for the training camp of life. It helped me understand the divine training camp God calls the Refiner's Fire.

There is one big difference. In that camp, performance, knowing the plays and good health secured your spot. In the Father's training camp, the requirements are brokenness and the loss of confidence in your own will. And the most important rule of all is simple.

If you don't quit, you win.

The Great Divine Strength Coach

"It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

Zechariah 4:6

Long before that camp, I was a freshman trying to make my mark on a college football team. That's where I met my college strength coach.

His workouts were legendary. The upperclassmen talked about them the way soldiers talk about a battle they barely survived, and on my first day under him I understood why. He pushed us to the brink. Every sprint, every lift and every drill felt like a fight against my own limits.

There were days I honestly thought he was trying to kill me. My muscles ached so badly I could hardly walk, my lungs burned, and I wondered whether I could survive another minute. But he was relentless. He saw potential in me that I couldn't yet see in myself.

Years passed. Session by session I grew stronger, faster and more resilient. By my third year I was no longer the uncertain freshman. I was drafted, and I carried what he built into the league.

In my fourth NFL season I walked into our team's facility on a hot afternoon, and there he was. He had become a consultant for NFL teams, and he was overseeing a group of rookies with the same intensity I remembered. Our eyes met, a rare smile crossed his face, and we hugged. In that quiet moment I understood the depth of what he had done for me.

He had pushed me beyond my limits, not to break me but to build me. And I realized something I had missed as a freshman. My real enemy was never my strength coach. My real enemy was the limits I had put on myself, because I wasn't willing to push myself the way he was willing to push me.

I see in that coach a small picture of our Father. He isn't trying to kill you. He sees what you can't see yet. And He knows that what He is building in you can't be built by your own might or power, only by His Spirit.

The Refiner sees what you can't see yet, and He builds what you can't build yourself.

Who Can Define the Patriot Way?

Ask almost any football fan what “the Patriot Way” means and you’ll hear some version of the same answer. Under head coach Bill Belichick, the New England Patriots built a culture of discipline, teamwork and excellence. It meant putting the team above individual accolades, executing the fundamentals, and outworking everyone. That culture was credited with years of resilience and a remarkable run of championships.

Every great team is known for something. So is every church and every believer.

Some time ago I felt the Lord ask me a simple question: “What do you want the people you lead to be known for?” My answer came quickly. I want us to be known as connoisseurs of the cross of Christ, people who understand the cost of discipleship, and people filled with the new wine of His Spirit.

Paul said the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, “but we who are being saved know it is the very power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Jesus said that whoever doesn’t carry their own cross and follow Him can’t be His disciple (Luke 14:27). And He said new wine must be poured into new wineskins (Matthew 9:17). A people like that will not be formed in a lounge. They will be formed in a weight room.

The Tools in the Weight Room

Here’s something every athlete learns the first week. In the weight room, you don’t need the weights to cooperate with you. You need them to resist you. If weights were designed to assist us, we would never get stronger.

Don’t misdiagnose your cross as an instrument of defeat. It’s an instrument of destiny.

Pain can make you bitter or it can make you better. The question is whether we will surrender to the Father’s training so we can be strengthened, or abort His process so we can be comfortable.

When I look at the way God trains His sons and daughters, I see eight tools in His weight room. These are tools of endurance, empathy and character.

1. **Fellowship of the Suffering.** Shared hardship and persecution with Christ that releases His Kingdom on the earth. “But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering” (Romans 8:17).
2. **Collateral Beauty.** Divine purpose and meaning born out of the dark night of the soul. God makes everything beautiful in its time (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We’ll spend a whole chapter here later.
3. **Gift of Tears.** Tears that become liquid prayer, softening the heart and giving us patience and empathy for other people’s process. God collects every one of them (Psalm 56:8).
4. **Brokenness.** Humble surrender that births repentance and acknowledges our need to follow God’s will. “The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God” (Psalm 51:17).
5. **Refiner’s Fire.** Trials that remove the dross of self-centeredness and purify our character; the way silver is purified in the furnace.
6. **The Crushing.** Like grapes pressed into wine, overwhelming pressure and disappointment prepare us to walk in the fear of the Lord and in our calling. “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed” (Psalm 34:18).
7. **Art of War.** Not all pain is God-authored, but all of it is God-filtered. God left some nations in the land to test Israel and to teach warfare to a generation that had never seen battle (Judges 3:1–2), so His people would learn to depend on Him.
8. **Power in Weakness.** Surrender under crushing circumstances that breaks our self-reliance and trains us to depend on the God who raises the dead and sustains us beyond our own strength.

None of these tools are comfortable. All of them are effective. And every one of them is in the hands of a Father who knows exactly how much weight to put on the bar.

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

James 1:2–4

James doesn’t tell us to enjoy the trouble. He tells us to see the opportunity in it. Endurance only grows under resistance. Nobody ever got stronger by watching

someone else lift.

Now You Know How I Feel

When my oldest son was eleven, he was competing in jiu-jitsu. Somehow he was placed in a higher bracket than his belt level, and he was outmatched. He was getting beat so badly that I wanted to run across the mat and pull him out.

In that moment, I felt the Father whisper, “Now you know how I feel.”

Then He began to show me how often He has wanted to rescue me from pain and affliction. But in His wisdom, He allows it, because it builds the endurance and resolve I will need for future battles.

That moment changed the way I read my own trials. How often do we misdiagnose the Refiner’s Fire? We focus on the pain of the moment, while God is focused on the future harvest and on eternity. The Father on the edge of the mat is not indifferent. He feels every hit. He is simply looking further down the road than we are.

The Father is watching every round, and He feels every hit.

The Red Sponge and the Blue Dye

Imagine dipping a red sponge into blue dye. When you squeeze it, some people expect red to come out. But only blue flows out.

Trials don’t change our character. They expose it. The sponge is our outward appearance; the dye is what we’ve actually absorbed. When life squeezes us, only what is truly inside comes out. Our first reaction to hardship reveals who we really are, and it reveals the truths and lies we believe about who God is to us.

Here are eight negative responses to being squeezed. See if you recognize any of them.

1. **Anger.** Quick frustration or hostility, lashing out at people or at the situation.
2. **Fear.** Being overwhelmed by anxiety or worry until we freeze or avoid.
3. **Blame.** Shifting responsibility to others and refusing to own our part.
4. **Despair.** Feeling hopeless and defeated, convinced nothing can change.
5. **Bitterness.** Holding on to resentment until the heart grows hard.
6. **Impatience.** Struggling to wait or endure, which leads to rash decisions.
7. **Distrust.** Doubting people or God’s intentions, which turns into skepticism and cynicism.

8. Withdrawal. Pulling away from relationships and support, isolating ourselves.

I've seen every one of these come out of my own sponge. If you've seen some of them come out of yours, you are not disqualified. You've just found out what God wants to work on next. The good news is that a sponge can be rinsed and filled again. That's what grace does.

Pressure doesn't put anything in you. It only shows what's already there.

Filling the Sponge

If trials expose what we've absorbed, then the real question is what we're soaking in before the squeeze comes.

Jesus said it this way: "A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart" (Luke 6:45). The words that come out of us in the hospital waiting room, the courtroom or the empty house were stored up long before we got there.

That's why the weight room matters so much. Athletes don't build strength on game day. They build it in the off-season, in rooms nobody films, doing repetitions nobody applauds. By the time the pressure comes, the work is already done or it isn't.

The same is true in the Spirit. What we soak in during the quiet seasons, prayer, the Word, worship, honest friendships, is what will flow out when we're squeezed. Paul described the dye God wants in us: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). That's fruit, and fruit grows. Nobody manufactures it under pressure. It's formed slowly by abiding, and then pressure reveals that it's real.

So if your last trial squeezed out anger or fear, don't stop at shame. Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you again. The Father would rather show you what's in your heart now, while it can still be changed, than let you discover it on the day it matters most.

How Does God Want Us to Respond?

If you want to impress someone, share your success stories. If you want to impact someone, share your failures.

Failure can be a friend or a foe. It depends on what we do with it. Don't beat yourself up over past failures. Repent, learn, and let God use them for His glory.

When you think about the legacy of Kobe Bryant, what comes to mind? For many people, it's his work ethic. But one of the most important chapters of his story started with a failure.

As an eighteen-year-old rookie in the playoffs, Kobe air-balled four shots in the closing minutes of an elimination game. Later he explained that it wasn't nerves and it wasn't talent. Every shot was on line, but every shot was short. He didn't have the legs. It was a preparation problem.

When the team landed back in Los Angeles, Kobe went straight to a high school gym. As the story goes, the janitor let him in, and he shot until the sun came up. Then he came back the next day, and the day after that.

Instead of letting failure define him, he let it reveal what needed to change. He trained differently and strengthened his body for the demands of a long season, so that the next time the playoffs came, his legs would be there and the ball would get there too.

That's exactly the kind of discipline Paul described:

Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Kobe didn't run aimlessly or react emotionally to failure. He responded with focus, sacrifice, perseverance and discipline. His setback wasn't the end of his story. It became part of his training.

Scripture says it plainly: "The godly may trip seven times, but they will get up again" (Proverbs 24:16). Failure does not determine your worth. When it's surrendered to God, it becomes a tutor that refines you, strengthens you and prepares you for what's ahead.

Many people repeat the same mistakes over and over because of pride and a lack of self-awareness. Few take the time to look honestly inside and make the changes in their preparation that it takes to overcome. Resilience is not simply about winning.

It's about refusing to quit, learning from weakness, and continuing to grow with purpose.

In regard to eternity, many run to finish, but few run to win.

The Late-Night Calls

Kobe's hunger didn't stop at the gym. Years later, at Kobe's memorial, Michael Jordan described the calls he used to get from him:

"He used to call me, text me, 11:30, 2:30, 3 o'clock in the morning, talking about post-up moves, footwork, and sometimes, the triangle. At first, it was an aggravation. But then it turned into a certain passion."

Michael Jordan

Jordan went on to say that when you have a strong passion for something, you will go to the extreme to get it. If you have to walk, you'll walk. If you have to beg someone, you'll beg.

I wonder how many of us have ever been that hungry for God. Kobe wanted to master a game, and he was willing to lose sleep and swallow his pride to learn from someone greater. We have access to the King of Kings at 3 o'clock in the morning, and He never gets aggravated when we call.

Here's what I've learned in His weight room. The pain doesn't last. The strength does. And one day, the same Father who let you get thrown around on the mat will be the One who raises your hand.

For the Road

1. Think about a coach, teacher or mentor who pushed you harder than you wanted to be pushed. What did they see in you that you couldn't see yet? What might the Father be seeing in you right now?
2. Look at the eight negative responses to being squeezed. Which one comes out of your "sponge" most often, and what does it reveal about what you believe about God?
3. Which tool in God's weight room are you under right now? How would your response change if you saw it as an instrument of destiny instead of defeat?

You don't need the weights to cooperate. You need them to resist you, and a Father who never leaves the room.

Ten Reasons to Value Pain

For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever!

2 Corinthians 4:17

Think about what people are willing to suffer for.

Athletes put their bodies through brutal training and run marathons. Students burn out and sacrifice years for a degree or a career. People endure surgeries, waxing and tattoos for beauty. They carry emotional wounds for the sake of love and family. Entrepreneurs take on financial risk and sleepless stress to build something new. Dieters live on strict meal plans and even go under the knife to reach a goal. Competitors play through injuries for a medal or a record. Millions take on years of student debt for a shot at a better life.

Nobody calls that crazy. We call it commitment.

So here's what I've come to believe. We are not really afraid of being crushed. We're afraid of being crushed for something we don't value.

We learn what we value by what we are willing to suffer to obtain.

P.T.S.

Most of us have heard of PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. It's a real condition that can follow a traumatic event, and it can bring flashbacks, severe anxiety, nightmares and thoughts a person can't control. If that's part of your story, please hear me: I'm not making light of it, and neither is God. He is close to the brokenhearted, and there is no shame in getting help.

But I want to borrow those letters for something else. I call it P.T.S.: Pain, Trials and Suffering. The world has taught us to see pain only as damage. Scripture teaches us that in a Father's hands, pain can also carry value. Not because pain is good in itself, but because of what God can do with it and what He can do in us through it.

Friedrich Nietzsche was no friend of the Christian faith, but he said something true:

“He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

When you know why you're suffering, you can endure almost anything. So here are ten reasons, ten whys, to value pain, trials and suffering.

1. To Glorify God

When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow, they went into the furnace rather than dishonor God (Daniel 3). When Job lost his children and everything he owned, he “fell to the ground to worship” (Job 1:20). When the apostles were flogged for preaching Jesus, they “left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus” (Acts 5:41).

Look at what happened in that furnace. The king looked in and shouted that he saw four men, unbound, walking around in the fire unharmed, “and the fourth looks like a god!” (Daniel 3:25). The three Hebrews didn't avoid the fire. They met God in it, and a pagan king ended up praising the God of Israel. Their pain became a platform for His glory.

Job's first words after the worst day of his life were worship: “The LORD gave me what I had, and the LORD has taken it away. Praise the name of the LORD!” (Job 1:21). He didn't understand what was happening. He worshiped anyway.

Suffering for His name is one of the clearest ways the world can see that God is worth more to us than comfort. Heidi Baker said it beautifully:

“God is not looking for extraordinary, exceptionally gifted people, just laid-down lovers of Jesus who will carry His glory with transparency and not take it for themselves.”

Heidi Baker

2. Discipline for Sinful Behavior

Some pain is the loving correction of a Father (Hebrews 12:5–11; 1 John 1:9). We'll look at the difference between discipline and training more closely elsewhere, but one truth belongs here.

Correction is not rejection.

A father who never corrects his children doesn't love them more. He loves them less. When God disciplines us, He is treating us as sons and daughters. And there's an easier road than waiting for correction: we can judge ourselves, repent quickly, and let Him remove what entangles us before it costs us more.

3. To Teach Us How to Die to the Flesh

Pain teaches us to die to the flesh, to selfish ambition and to temporary pleasures. It is death to entitlement.

So then, since Christ suffered physical pain, you must arm yourselves with the same attitude he had, and be ready to suffer, too. For if you have suffered physically for Christ, you have finished with sin. You won't spend the rest of your lives chasing your own desires, but you will be anxious to do the will of God.

1 Peter 4:1-2

Jesus had a why. "Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame" (Hebrews 12:2). He was motivated to endure His cross by knowing that one day we would be His. Our motivation in enduring our cross is knowing that one day we will be fully His.

Paul tells us to let the same mindset be in us. Jesus "gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave," and "humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8). Self-promotion can't survive long in the shadow of that cross.

Pain Is Your Guide, Not Your Enemy

Before we go on, I want to stop and say something about pain itself.

There is a rare condition called congenital insensitivity to pain. People born with it can't feel physical pain. That might sound like a gift, but it's dangerous. They may not realize they've been injured. A cut goes untreated, a broken bone goes unnoticed, an infection spreads. Without pain, the body loses its warning system.

Spiritual pain can work the same way. It alerts us that something needs attention. It drives us to the Father for care. It reminds us that we were never built to live independent of Him. A believer who never feels anything when they drift is in more danger than one who aches.

Pain isn't your enemy. Sometimes it's the only thing telling you the truth.

So when something hurts, don't only ask, "How do I make this stop?" Ask, "What is this telling me?" Sometimes it's pointing to a wound that needs healing. Sometimes it's exposing a sin that needs repenting. Sometimes it's simply reminding you how much you need the Father. In every case, it's an invitation to bring the hurt to Him instead of numbing it.

4. To Keep Us from Pride

Pride is the hardest enemy to see. God humbled Nebuchadnezzar until he acknowledged that the Most High rules (Daniel 4). He gave Paul a thorn "to keep me from becoming proud" (2 Corinthians 12:7). And King Uzziah shows us what happens when success goes unchecked.

But when he had become powerful, he also became proud, which led to his downfall. He sinned against the LORD his God by entering the sanctuary of the LORD's Temple and personally burning incense on the incense altar.

2 Chronicles 26:16

Uzziah was a good king for a long time. But strength turned into confidence, and confidence turned into presumption. He stepped into a role God had never given him.

I once heard about a respected internal medicine physician I'll call Dr. Whitcombe. He built a successful practice through dedication and real expertise. As his reputation grew, so did his confidence, and he decided he could expand his skills. He began performing surgeries, even though he had no formal surgical training. At first it seemed to work, and some patients praised him. Then complications came. Patients were harmed, legal trouble followed, and the medical board revoked his license for overstepping his professional boundaries.

Success can breed pride, and pride makes us overreach. Pain has a way of keeping us in our lane and keeping us dependent. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Sometimes it takes a thorn to make us believe Him.

5. To Build Faith and Cause Growth

We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

Romans 5:3-5

Paul knew what it was to be crushed beyond his ability to endure, and he said it taught him to stop relying on himself and to rely only on God, who raises the dead (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). That's growth. Losing confidence in ourselves is only half the lesson. The other half is putting our confidence in Him.

Here's something I've watched over and over. The same circumstance that births offense in one person's heart will provoke spiritual hunger in another's. The trial doesn't decide which. We do. And Jesus always makes provision for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

6. To Teach Us the Value of Obedience and Discipline

LORD, remember David and all that he suffered. He made a solemn promise to the LORD. He vowed to the Mighty One of Israel, "I will not go home; I will not let myself rest. I will not let my eyes sleep nor close my eyelids in slumber until I find a place to build a house for the LORD, a sanctuary for the Mighty One of Israel."

Psalms 132:1-5

David's hardships taught him to want God's presence more than his own rest. That kind of hunger isn't born in comfort. It's hard to hunger and thirst for God when our bellies are full of entertainment and we're drunk on the pleasures of this age.

I believe God wants a Church known for the pursuit of His presence, the passion of prayer, the power of the prophetic, and the value of pain. That last one doesn't sell well. But Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned us what happens when we leave it out:

"Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Grace is free, but it is not cheap. It cost Jesus everything, and it calls us to follow Him.

7. To Equip Us to Comfort Others

Paul calls God “the source of all comfort,” who “comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). Some of what you’re walking through is not only for you. The comfort you receive in your darkest season becomes the comfort you carry to someone else’s. People can tell the difference between a person who has read about the valley and a person who has walked through it.

Think about Moses. He spent forty years in the wilderness of Midian before God ever sent him to Pharaoh, and then forty more years leading Israel through the wilderness. The first forty prepared him to shepherd people through the second. Will we trust the goodness of God when He lets us go through the Refiner’s fire so we can help others through the same refining?

8. To Prove the Reality of Christ in Us

We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves. We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.

2 Corinthians 4:7–9

When a clay jar cracks, the light inside shows through. Notice the pattern in Paul’s words: pressed but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, hunted but not abandoned, knocked down but not destroyed. Every line has a “but.” The pressure is real, and so is the power that keeps us from being destroyed by it. The world can explain a strong person doing well in good times. It can’t explain a fragile jar that keeps shining in the dark. Suffering proves that what’s carrying us is His power and not ours. “It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit,” says the Lord (Zechariah 4:6). And the secret Paul announced to the nations is this: “Christ lives in you. This gives you assurance of sharing his glory” (Colossians 1:27).

9. To Know the Value of Being a Living Sacrifice

Jesus said, “If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it” (Matthew 10:38–39). He also said that when people mock and persecute us because we follow Him, we should “be happy about it,” because “a great reward awaits you in heaven” (Matthew 5:11–12).

Paul pleaded with believers to give their bodies to God because of all He has done for us, to “let them be a living and holy sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). The problem with a living sacrifice is that it can crawl off the altar. A living sacrifice is someone who keeps climbing back on. Paul wrote, “I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death” (Philippians 3:10), because he wanted to know Christ more than he wanted to avoid pain. He also said, “If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ’s servant” (Galatians 1:10). We are His ambassadors, and suffering keeps checking whose interests we are really representing.

10. A Reminder That Earth Is Not Our Home

Paul endured shipwrecks, prisons and beatings, yet at the end he could say, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful” (2 Timothy 4:7). His eyes were on eternity. “But we are citizens of heaven,” he wrote, “where the Lord Jesus Christ lives” (Philippians 3:20).

A fish out of water knows it’s in the wrong place. Suffering can make us feel the same way, misplaced and uncomfortable in this world. That ache is a reminder that we were made for somewhere else. Trials loosen our grip on earthly comfort and turn our hearts toward the One who is our true home.

Suffering makes us homesick for heaven, and that’s a holy kind of ache.

Trophies of His Grace

Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful.

1 Corinthians 1:26–27

God doesn't call the qualified. He qualifies the called. And very often, the qualifying happens in pain.

God is working behind the scenes to turn the enemy's attacks into His trophies. Can we truly delight in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and troubles suffered for Christ? If we can, those very things become more than pain. They become a doorway to His power and authority, making us weapons against the kingdom of darkness and trophies of His grace.

So go back to the list we started with. People will suffer for a degree, a body, a business or a medal, things that fade. You've been invited to suffer for something that will never fade: the glory of God, the likeness of Christ, the comfort of others, and a home that is waiting for you.

That is a why worth any how.

For the Road

1. Look back at the list of things people willingly suffer for. What have you been willing to suffer for in your own life, and what does that reveal about what you value?
2. Which of the ten reasons speaks most to the season you're in right now? Why?
3. Has a recent trial produced offense in you, or hunger? What would it look like to let it become hunger?

When you know why you're suffering and Who you're suffering for, the pain finally has somewhere to go.

The Wilderness

Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River. He was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil for forty days. Jesus ate nothing all that time and became very hungry.

Luke 4:1-2

Think about what had just happened to Jesus. He stood in the Jordan River, the heavens opened, the Spirit descended on Him like a dove, and the Father spoke out loud for everyone to hear: “You are my dearly loved Son, and you are bringing me great joy” (Luke 3:22).

That is about as high a moment as a life can hold. Identity affirmed. Obedience honored. Heaven itself saying, “That’s My boy.”

And the very next thing the Spirit did was lead Him into the desert.

Here is the irony I can’t get past. The Father had just affirmed Jesus’ identity and His complete obedience, and His reward for surrender was the wilderness, not the palace. No crowds. No platform. No food. Forty days of hunger, heat and the devil’s voice.

If that was the path for the sinless Son of God, why are we so shocked when the Spirit leads us there too?

Sometimes the reward for obedience is not the palace. It’s the wilderness.

Led by the Spirit, or Lost by Our Choices

Not every wilderness is the same. Scripture shows us two kinds, and it matters a great deal which one you’re in.

The first is the **Spirit-led wilderness**. Jesus didn’t wander into the desert by accident or end up there because He sinned. He was *led* there, full of the Holy Spirit. A Spirit-led wilderness is a classroom God chooses on purpose. It strips away distractions and prepares us for what He has called us to carry.

The second is the

self-inflicted wilderness

. When we refuse to learn in the wilderness God leads us into, we open ourselves to the one we create by our own choices.

The prophet Hosea paints this picture with painful honesty. In Hosea 2, Israel is pictured as an unfaithful wife who runs after other lovers and credits them with the grain, the new wine and the olive oil God had given her. So God fences her path with thornbushes and blocks her way with a wall, until she finally says, “I might as well return to my husband, for I was better off with him than I am now” (Hosea 2:7). Even His discipline is designed to bring her home. That chapter does not end in judgment. It turns toward a tender promise we’ll look at closely in the next chapter.

Paul looked back at Israel’s forty years in the desert and saw a warning for us. They were all under the cloud. They all passed through the sea. They all ate the manna and drank from the rock, “and that rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:4). Yet most of them never made it out. They craved what was worthless, turned to idols, gave themselves to immorality, put the Lord to the test and grumbled against Him.

These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us, who live at the end of the age.

1 Corinthians 10:11

Then, right after that sober warning, Paul gives one of the most comforting promises in the Bible:

The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.

1 Corinthians 10:13

God measures every test before it reaches you. He knows the severity, the nature and the timing, and He has already built the way out.

Here is where many of us go wrong. When we misdiagnose the wilderness as a place of barrenness instead of a place of brokenness, we drift into a heart posture of independence instead of dependence. We think, “God left me out here,” so we start fending for ourselves. But the wilderness was never meant to prove that God is absent. It was meant to prove that He is enough.

The wilderness is not where God abandons you. It's where He weans you.

The Girls, the Gold and the Glory

Every wilderness has a test in it. Some people summarize the enemy's oldest temptations as "the girls, the gold and the glory." John put them this way:

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

I see three tests in the wilderness, and Jesus faced every one of them:

1. **The Lust of the Eyes (the world).** Worldly values that are empty and passing, set against God's design. Ask yourself: is compromise for worldly power, fame or influence being offered to me? The devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and offered Him their glory if He would only bow (Luke 4:5–7).
2. **The Lust of the Flesh (desire).** Our corrupt inclinations and disordered passions. Ask yourself: is instant gratification being offered to me? The devil told a starving Jesus to turn a stone into bread (Luke 4:3).
3. **The Pride of Life (the devil).** We face a real, personal enemy, the father of lies. Ask yourself: is God's goodness being put on trial? The devil took Jesus to the top of the Temple and dared Him to jump, to make the Father prove His care (Luke 4:9–12).

Jesus answered every test with the Word of God. And notice how He came out:

Then Jesus returned to Galilee, filled with the Holy Spirit's power. Reports about him spread quickly through the whole region.

Luke 4:14

He went in *full* of the Spirit. He came out in the *power* of the Spirit. Something happened in between.

How many of us run from the wilderness, or complain our way through it, instead of letting the Holy Spirit lead us? Many die in the wilderness season because of worry, rather than being weaned from their flesh so they can be filled with the Spirit.

Full of the Spirit is where the wilderness starts. Power of the Spirit is how it ends.

Everyone Has a Wilderness

Look at the people God used most, and you'll find a desert somewhere in their story.

- **Joseph** spent about thirteen years between the pit and the palace. He was seventeen when his brothers sold him (Genesis 37:2) and thirty when he stood before Pharaoh (Genesis 41:46). Those years included slavery and prison.
- **Jacob** served his uncle Laban for twenty years, and Laban changed his wages ten times (Genesis 31:41).
- **David** was anointed king as a young man, then spent years running from Saul, hiding in caves with a crown on his future and a target on his back.
- **Moses** spent forty years in the wilderness of Midian before the burning bush, and then forty more years leading Israel through the desert (Acts 7:23–36). Most people say Moses was in the wilderness for forty years. It was closer to eighty.
- **Job** walked through chapter after chapter of loss and confusion before God restored him.
- **Jesus** spent forty days in the desert before He preached His first sermon.

Moses' story teaches me something I've had to learn more than once. We often mistake our season of divine *calling* for our season of divine *commissioning*. Moses felt the call of God on his life as a young man, and he acted on it too soon and in his own strength. He tried to become Israel's deliverer by killing an Egyptian, and he had to run for his life. He acted publicly before he had learned to conquer his inner battles privately.

So God took him to the back side of the desert. Before God could use Moses to deliver Israel from Pharaoh in public, He had to deliver Moses from himself in solitude. A baby needs about forty weeks in the womb before it's ready for the world. Moses needed forty years in the wilderness before he was ready for his assignment.

When God keeps you hidden, He is equipping you. He is sharpening your gifts and building spiritual authority while you wait for your appointed time. Jeremiah Johnson put it in a way that has stayed with me:

"When prophetic voices are not trained in hiddenness, they constantly crave visibility. They hunger to be commissioned when they need to be consecrated."

Jeremiah Johnson

I have watched more people with a genuine anointing grow bitter over “lost dreams” than I have watched people with both anointing and character make it through their wilderness training. Being called and favored by God does not automatically mean you are ready and released. Don’t rush His timing because you feel you have something to prove.

Leonard Ravenhill once said, “If you want to be like Jesus, remember, He had a wilderness, a Gethsemane, and a Judas.” We love the first half of that sentence. We forget the second.

Your calling can come in a moment. Your commissioning usually comes through a wilderness.

Preparation, Not Punishment

The wilderness is not about punishment. It’s about preparation.

When Israel left Egypt, God could have taken them the short way, straight up the coast through Philistine territory. He didn’t. He knew that if they faced a war too soon, they would turn around and run back to slavery. “So God led them in a roundabout way through the wilderness toward the Red Sea” (Exodus 13:18). The long way was the merciful way. They weren’t ready for the battle yet, and God loved them too much to send them into it unprepared.

Sometimes the fastest road to your destiny is the one that looks the slowest. Some things can only be learned by being battle-tested.

Look at the disciples after the resurrection. For forty days Jesus appeared to them and taught them about the Kingdom (Acts 1:3). Then, before He ascended, He gave them an instruction that must have felt like a delay:

Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before.

Acts 1:4

And He told them why: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you” (Acts 1:8). About ten days after He ascended, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit fell. The believers who had gathered in that upper room, about 120 of them (Acts 1:15), had spent those days waiting, praying and being cleansed of their own plans. The waiting room became the launching pad.

The true baptism of fire and power is often forged in a season of waiting, and it requires real surrender.

God never wastes a wilderness. He uses it to prepare you for what you couldn't carry yet.

What Are You Hungry For?

Luke tells us that after forty days without food, Jesus “became very hungry” (Luke 4:2). That’s exactly when the devil showed up.

The enemy doesn’t come to tempt us in our spiritual wilderness until he believes our hunger for fleshly desires is greater than our hunger for God’s presence. That’s one reason fasting is such a good practice. It trains us to say no to physical hunger so that we can say yes to a deeper one. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told His disciples, “the spirit is willing, but the body is weak” (Matthew 26:41). In the wilderness we learn not to trust our own willpower to plow through the pain. We lean on the Lord and wait for Him to renew our strength (Isaiah 40:31).

Moses explained to Israel what all those years in the desert had been for:

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. Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

Deuteronomy 8:2-3

God didn't let Israel go hungry to torture them. He did it to train them. He wanted them to know that when you wait on the Lord, He can satisfy you with spiritual food that is better than any earthly pleasure. As the Song of Songs says, His love is “sweeter than wine” (Song of Songs 1:2).

Here’s a principle I’ve seen over and over.

Spiritual anointing is accessed by stewarding your gifts. Spiritual authority is accessed by refusing to self-medicate your needs and desires with instant gratification.

Esau is the warning.

Make sure that no one is immoral or godless like Esau, who traded his birthright as the firstborn son for a single meal. You know that afterward, when he wanted his father's blessing, he was rejected. It was too late for repentance, even though he begged with bitter tears.

Hebrews 12:16-17

Esau forfeited his God-given destiny because he let his hunger for instant gratification drown out his hunger for God. He was thinking, "What good is my birthright to me if I'm starving right now?" That is the voice of the flesh in every wilderness. What good is my purpose if I'm hurting today? What good is my calling if I can't have what I want right now?

If we don't submit to the purifying process of the wilderness and let the Holy Spirit lead us, we won't walk in true Kingdom power and authority. Instead of coming out of the wilderness leaning on our Beloved, we'll just keep circling the Mountain of Mistrust.

Seven Lessons from the Wilderness

Over the years I've gathered seven lessons the wilderness tends to teach. Each one is a choice.

- 1. Salvation vs. Sanctification.** Salvation is the moment God delivers us from sin. Sanctification is the lifelong process of being made holy. Israel's exodus from Egypt pictures salvation; their years in the wilderness picture sanctification. Paul tells us to "work hard to show the results of your salvation" because "God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him" (Philippians 2:12-13). Everyone wants resurrection power over life's difficult circumstances, but few want resurrection power over their sin nature and over being wise in their own eyes. Yet that's exactly what Romans 6 offers: we were buried with Christ and raised with Him so that we could live new lives.
- 2. Available vs. Automatic (God's love vs. God's pleasure).** God's love is unconditional. He showed it by sending Christ to die for us "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8). But "it is impossible to please God without faith" (Hebrews 11:6). King Saul was loved by God, yet he lost God's favor through disobedience. Intimacy with God is available to everyone. It is not automatic.

3. **Refined by Fire or Rejected by God.** The wilderness can feel like rejection when it's really refinement. Peter says our trials "will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold" (1 Peter 1:7). Job was refined through his trials, never rejected by God.
4. **Complaining in Your Wilderness vs. Contentment in Your Wilderness.** "Do everything without complaining and arguing" (Philippians 2:14), because "true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth" (1 Timothy 6:6). Complaining focuses on the problem. Contentment focuses on God's provision and character. Israel complained over and over while eating bread from heaven every morning.
5. **Compromise vs. Consecration in the Wilderness.** When we feel abandoned, we're tempted to shrink our convictions down to the size of our circumstances. Israel built a golden calf at the foot of the very mountain where God was speaking. The call of the wilderness is the opposite: "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think" (Romans 12:2).
6. **Trials: God-Inflicted vs. God-Filtered.** Not every trial is caused by God, but nothing reaches you that hasn't passed through His hands. "Don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12). Joseph's trials were real and painful, and God used every one of them for His purposes.
7. **Wilderness: The Womb of Destiny or the Tomb of Destruction.** The same desert can become a place of new beginnings or a place of defeat. It depends on how we respond. Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tested, and He came out ready for His ministry. Even in the darkest valley, we don't have to be afraid, "for you are close beside me" (Psalm 23:4).

**You will either come out of your wilderness purified, leaning on your Beloved,
or stay stuck in it, limping in pain.**

Eleven Days or Forty Years

There is a verse tucked into the first chapter of Deuteronomy that should stop all of us in our tracks:

Normally it takes only eleven days to travel from Mount Sinai to Kadesh-barnea, going by way of Mount Seir.

Deuteronomy 1:2

Eleven days. It took Israel forty years.

The distance wasn't the problem. Their hearts were. When they reached the edge of the Promised Land and heard about the giants, they refused to go in. Moses reminded them what they said: "You complained in your tents and said, 'The LORD must hate us. That's why he has brought us here from Egypt—to hand us over to the Amorites to be slaughtered'" (Deuteronomy 1:27).

Think about that. God had split the sea, fed them from the sky and led them with fire, and they concluded He hated them. That is what happens when we judge God's heart by our circumstances. A Spirit-led wilderness turned into a self-inflicted one, and an eleven-day trip became a forty-year funeral march.

So here is the question each of us has to answer: Will this be an eleven-day trip to the Promised Land, or forty years of wandering in the wilderness of despair because we failed to trust the goodness of God?

There are two modes many of us live in. In survival mode, we're just trying to get through the day. In success mode, we're trying to build something that makes us feel secure. Both can keep us so busy that we never stop to seek God's face. What's the cure for survival mode and success mode? Very often, it's the wilderness. God takes away the noise until we can hear Him again.

The most painful parts of your process can carry the greatest potential to birth power and authority in your life. Your pain will either become your prison or your womb. It can hold you captive, or it can carry you into your destiny. A tomb and a womb are both dark places. The difference is whether something is dying there or something is being born.

I know some of you are in the desert right now. It's dry, it's lonely, and it feels like it will never end. Hear me as a father: you are not forgotten out there. The same Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness led Him out in power. He hasn't brought you this far to leave you. He's bringing you somewhere, and He's walking every mile beside you.

A tomb and a womb are both dark. One holds what has died. The other holds what is about to be born.

For the Road

1. Does your current season feel more like a Spirit-led wilderness or a self-inflicted one? What makes you think so, and what would it look like to respond well to

either?

2. Of the three tests (the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life), which one has been loudest in your life lately? What is it offering you, and what Scripture could you answer it with?
3. What are you hungry for right now? Where might you be tempted, like Esau, to trade something eternal for something immediate?

The wilderness is not God's punishment. It's His preparation, and no one has to walk it alone.

Leaning on the Beloved

Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved? Under the apple tree I awakened you. There your mother was in labor with you; there she who bore you was in labor.

Song of Songs 8:5 (ESV)

Picture the scene. Somewhere out on the horizon of a dry, empty desert, two figures appear. As they come closer, you can see it's a bride and her beloved. She isn't striding out ahead of him. She isn't marching out on her own strength. She's leaning on him, her weight resting fully on his arm.

And the onlookers ask, "Who is that?"

They knew who went *into* the wilderness. They don't recognize who came *out*. Something happened to her out there. She went in independent and came out dependent. She went in as someone who knew about him and came out as someone who couldn't take a step without him.

That's what the wilderness is for.

Many die in the wilderness bitter and offended with God. Few emerge broken, fully trusting and leaning on their Beloved.

Four Pictures in One Verse

The Song of Songs is a love song, and I believe it gives us a picture of the love between Christ and His Bride. In this one verse there are four images worth slowing down for.

1. **The Wilderness.** It represents trials and refinement. Coming up out of it is a sign of trust and unity between the bride and her beloved. She didn't skip the desert. She came through it.
2. **Leaning on the Beloved.** This speaks of reliance, dependence and a bond that was formed through the crushing. You don't learn to lean on someone when you can stand fine on your own. You learn it when your legs give out.

3. **The Apple Tree.** It represents love, shelter, provision and spiritual nourishment.

Earlier in the Song, the bride describes her beloved as the finest apple tree in the orchard, and she rests in his shade and tastes his fruit (Song of Songs 2:3). I also see in it an echo of another tree, the tree in the garden where humanity made its choice, and a foreshadowing of the redemption Christ would bring.

4. **The Mother's Labor.** Love's foundation is tied to birth, and birth always comes through pain and sacrifice. The personal travail of the wilderness becomes a prophetic picture of something being born.

One paraphrase puts the verse this way: "She arises out of her desert, clinging to her beloved" (TPT). I love that. *Her* desert. Everyone has one.

We like to think love is proven in the good times, at the wedding and on the honeymoon. But the deepest love is proven when it costs something.

Love isn't fully love until it's been tested in the Refiner's fire.

True love is forged in the fires of adversity.

I Will Allure Her

In the last chapter, we looked at Hosea 2, where God's unfaithful bride runs after other lovers and God blocks her path with thornbushes. But the chapter doesn't end there. It turns on one of the most tender promises in all of Scripture.

But then I will win her back once again. I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her there. I will return her vineyards to her and transform the Valley of Trouble into a gateway of hope.

Hosea 2:14-15

The English Standard Version says it this way: "I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her." Allure. That's the language of courtship. God isn't dragging her into the desert to punish her. He's drawing her there to be alone with her.

Why the wilderness? Because the wilderness eliminates distractions. In the city, there are a thousand voices competing for her attention. In the desert, there's only one. When everything else is stripped away, she can finally hear Him speak to her heart.

In Scripture, the wilderness and the desert are pictures of alienation and anguish. They are dry, lonely, barren places. Yet over and over, the prophets promise that God

alone can turn the desert into a blooming, fruitful garden, a picture of the fullness and joy of His salvation. Isaiah heard a voice calling out to prepare the way of the Lord *in the wilderness* (Isaiah 40:3). The highway for our God runs straight through the desert. The very place that feels most empty is the place He chooses to meet us.

And look at what He promises to do there. The Valley of Trouble (in Hebrew, the Valley of Achor, where Israel's sin brought disaster in Joshua 7) becomes a gateway of hope. The place of your worst failure becomes the doorway to your future. Then God says, "When that day comes, you will call me 'my husband' instead of 'my master'" (Hosea 2:16). The relationship moves from duty to intimacy, from servant to bride.

I believe the Church has been in a Spirit-led wilderness to reset the Body of Christ and bring her back to her first love. Jesus said to the church in Ephesus, a church that was busy, orthodox and hardworking:

But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first!

Revelation 2:4

All their labor couldn't make up for lost love. So He called them to remember, to turn back and to do the things they did at first.

Misty Edwards wrote something about God's jealousy that helps me understand why He goes to such lengths:

"Love is a two-sided coin, and He is jealous and exclusive—not because He is insecure, but because, by design, we are fashioned for Him."

Misty Edwards, *What Is the Point?*

When we turn from Him to anything else, we become distorted, and it leads to our destruction. He loves us too much to let that happen. So sometimes He creates a situation that makes us run back to Him. Even His discipline flows from His primary desire, which is relationship with us.

God doesn't lead you into the desert to lose you. He leads you there to have you all to Himself.

One Thing

A word the Lord pressed on my heart in one season was simple: beware of distractions. Many things will fight for your affection and attention, and the strongest

are usually love of self and self-comfort.

David had a lot going on. He was a king, a warrior, a father and a songwriter. But when he boiled his whole life down, he only asked for one thing:

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.

Psalms 27:4 (ESV)

Not ten things. Not a strategic plan. One thing.

Jesus told two short parables about the same idea. A man found treasure hidden in a field, hid it again, and in his excitement sold everything he owned to buy that field. A merchant searching for fine pearls found one of great value and sold everything to get it (Matthew 13:44–46). Neither of them felt like they were sacrificing. They were overjoyed. When you find the one thing worth everything, letting go of everything else stops feeling like loss.

In the Kingdom, less is more. One thing is worth more than a thousand distractions.

Most of us don't drift from God because we decide to walk away from Him. We drift because a hundred good things slowly crowd out the one necessary thing. A little more work. A little more scrolling. A little more worry. None of it looks like rebellion. But one day we look up and realize we haven't gazed on His beauty in a long time. We've been inquiring about everything except Him.

Less is more. Fewer voices, more of His. Fewer pursuits, more presence. Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is say no to something good so you can say yes to Someone better.

The prophet Haggai spoke to people who were working hard and getting almost nothing for it. God told them why: "Because my house lies in ruins, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, while all of you are busy building your own fine houses" (Haggai 1:9). They were busy, but they were busy with the wrong house.

Solomon said it like this:

Unless the LORD builds a house, the work of the builders is wasted. Unless the LORD protects a city, guarding it with sentries will do no good. It is useless for you to work so hard from early morning until late at night, anxiously working for food to eat; for God gives rest to his loved ones.

Psalms 127:1-2

God gives rest to His loved ones. Rest is not laziness. It's the posture of someone who knows they're loved.

The Martha Mentality

You know the story. Jesus came to a village, and a woman named Martha opened her home to Him. Her sister Mary sat at His feet listening to Him teach, while Martha was distracted by all the preparations. Finally Martha had had enough. She came to Jesus and said, in so many words, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work? Tell her to help me."

Jesus' answer was gentle and piercing:

But the Lord said to her, "My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10:41-42

One thing again.

I believe one of the main things the wilderness does is kill the Martha mentality, the spirit of busyness that focuses more on doing things *for* God than listening *to* God. Martha wasn't doing anything sinful. She was serving Jesus! But she was so busy serving Him that she missed Him.

And here's something I've noticed about Marthas. They always feel like they're getting the short end of the stick. Why? Because for a Martha, intimacy with Jesus isn't as important as being rewarded for working for Jesus. So when the reward doesn't come the way they expected, resentment does. "Lord, don't You care?"

Survival mode and success mode both feed the Martha mentality. One says, "I don't have time to sit down, I'm just trying to make it." The other says, "I don't have time to sit down, look at everything I'm building." Either way, we never sit down.

Even Jesus, the Son of God, lived leaning. He said, “the Son can do nothing by himself” (John 5:19). He did only what He saw the Father doing. He had complete dependence on, and complete trust in, His Father. If He lived leaning, so must we. “Apart from me,” He told us, “you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Martha served Jesus. Mary sat with Him. Only one of them was told she had chosen what could never be taken away.

Intimacy Is Measured by Trust

There’s a parable often told that has helped me more than I can say.

A woman dreamed she was standing in a meadow full of golden light. In front of her stood three women, and Jesus came walking slowly past them. He passed the first woman without a glance. To the second, He gave a brief, warm smile. The third was trembling and in tears, and He wrapped her in a tender embrace and whispered, “It’s all gonna be okay.”

Then He asked the dreamer which of the three had the deepest intimacy with Him. “The third,” she said. “You held her closest.”

“No,” He answered. “The first.” Her trust was so steady that she needed no sign; His Word was enough for her. The second was walking a hard road, and His smile reminded her she wasn’t alone. The third woman’s heart was faltering, and His embrace was not a reward for her strength but a mercy for her fragility. What we see is rarely the whole story.

I don’t tell that story to make anyone feel bad for needing comfort. Jesus gives it gladly, and some seasons we all need Him to hold us and whisper, “It’s all gonna be okay.” But the parable reveals something true:

intimacy with God is measured not by how much He does for us, but by how deeply we trust Him, even in silence.

Think about what that means for your wilderness. The silence you’re living in may not be a sign that God has stepped away. It may be a sign of how much He trusts you. The seasons when we feel Him least can be the seasons when our trust is growing most, if we keep leaning.

That’s why tremendous amounts of pressure can often birth tremendous amounts of intimacy. The wilderness strips away the feelings and the signs, and it leaves you with

Him. Intimacy is available to everyone. It is not automatic. It grows in the places where you have nothing else to lean on.

God Is the Reward

In our wilderness seasons, we often want God to follow a pattern we can predict: refinement, then repentance, then responsibility, then reward. We go through the hard thing, we learn our lesson, we get promoted. But that is not the rhythm of the wilderness.

We might go into the desert looking for promotion, provision or peace. The true reward there is His presence.

Remember what God told Abram: “I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward” (Genesis 15:1, NKJV). The reward was never something God would hand over. It was God Himself.

Our tastes and desires are all over the place. People look for fulfillment in possessions, achievements, relationships and passing pleasures, and those things often conflict with each other and never last. But in Jesus we find the true Desire of every heart. He offers lasting fulfillment: love, peace and purpose that satisfy the spiritual hunger of every soul. Only His love can satisfy us, because His presence is the true reward. It’s the one answer to our search for love, meaning and belonging.

David knew it too:

You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever.

Psalm 16:11

If you’re in the wilderness right now, I want to say this as gently as I can. You may not get every answer you’re looking for out there. You may not get the explanation, the timeline or the outcome you’ve been praying for. But you can come out with something better. You can come out knowing Him. You can come out leaning.

And one day, the people who watched you go into that desert will look up and see you coming back over the horizon. They’ll ask, “Who is that?” And the answer will be: someone who found out the Beloved was enough.

The wilderness may take away what you were leaning on, so that you can learn to lean on Him.

For the Road

1. Of the four pictures in Song of Songs 8:5 (the wilderness, leaning on the Beloved, the apple tree and the mother's labor), which one speaks most to your season right now, and why?
2. Where do you see the Martha mentality in your own life? What would it look like this week to "sit at His feet" instead of only serving Him?
3. If intimacy is measured by trust, especially in silence, how would you honestly describe your intimacy with God right now?

Many go into the wilderness. The ones who come out leaning on their Beloved find He was the reward all along.

PART FIVE

Job and the Courts of Heaven

What do we do when we don't understand?

The Trial of the Century

Then the LORD asked Satan, “Have you noticed my servant Job? He is the finest man in all the earth. He is blameless—a man of complete integrity. He fears God and stays away from evil.”

Job 1:8

When I say these names, see what comes to mind: Johnnie Cochran, Robert Shapiro, F. Lee Bailey, Alan Dershowitz.

If you’re old enough, you probably thought of one courtroom and one nickname. The press called that defense team the “Dream Team,” and they called the case “the trial of the century.”

That phrase has been used for a lot of famous court cases over the last two hundred years. It isn’t a legal category. It’s an opinion, a way of saying, “This one matters more than the others.” Every generation seems to find a new one.

I want to suggest that the real trial of the century, the trial of every century, was recorded thousands of years ago. It didn’t happen in a courthouse in California. It happened in the courts of heaven. The defendant was a man named Job, the prosecutor was Satan himself, and the Judge was God.

And I believe the key to unlocking the power and purpose of pain lies in understanding that courtroom.

The Bookends of the Bible

Many scholars believe Job is among the oldest books of the Bible. Bob Sorge, in his book *Pain, Perplexity, and Promotion*, points to what Bible teachers call “the law of first mention”: when something shows up for the first time in Scripture, it sets the platform for understanding everything that comes after it. If Job is one of the first pages God ever put on paper, then pay attention to where it takes place.

It takes place in a courtroom.

So does the last book of the Bible. Revelation is full of thrones, books that are opened, verdicts, and an accuser who is finally thrown down. Some of God's earliest words to us and His grand finale show Him the same way: as a Righteous Judge.

For the LORD is our judge, our lawgiver, and our king. He will care for us and save us.

Isaiah 33:22

That matters, because we often confuse God's patience with His approval. We forget that He is a righteous King. And when we forget that He is a Judge, we also forget that He is the One who will set every wrong thing right.

The God who allows the trial is the same God who sits on the bench.

Appeal to Heaven

The Bible is full of legal language. Once you start to notice it, you can't stop. Here are a few words worth knowing if you're going to understand what happens to Job, and what happens to you.

Covenant.

A covenant is a formal, legally binding declaration of what one party will give to another. At the Last Supper Jesus took the cup and called it "my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people" (Matthew 26:28). Many Christians are legally saved by the blood of the New Covenant but still living in an Old Testament legal reality, simply because they don't know what's available to them.

Trial.

The old dictionaries define a trial as an effort made to find out what something can do, a test, an experiment. A man tries to lift a stone and on trial discovers he can't. Trials reveal what is actually there.

Judge. The Greek word *krinō* means to separate, to distinguish, to come to a decision. A judge is the one appointed to decide the case.

Adversary.

The adversary is the one who files formal charges. "Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

Accuser. The word is *katēgoros*, a prosecutor. The name *Satan* itself means accuser. John saw the day when “the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down to earth—the one who accuses them before our God day and night” (Revelation 12:10).

Advocate. The Greek *paraklētos* means one called close beside you. In the first century it was the ordinary word for a defense attorney, someone close enough to the situation to make the right call and give evidence that stands up in court. Jesus used that word for the Holy Spirit: “But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you” (John 14:26).

Mediator.

A mediator stands between two parties at odds and pleads on behalf of one to reconcile them. “For there is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). While soldiers were driving nails into His hands, He was already doing the work: “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Jeremiah understood this when he prayed:

Lord, you are my lawyer! Plead my case! For you have redeemed my life. You have seen the wrong they have done to me, LORD. Be my judge, and prove me right.

Lamentations 3:58–59

Here’s the question I can’t get away from. The accuser is looking for someone to agree with his charges. How often do we come into agreement with the ministry of accusation, against others and against ourselves?

The devil needs someone to co-sign his lawsuit. Don’t lend him your signature.

The Real Dream Team

Remember that famous defense team? Lawyers like that are hired because they win.

Believers have the ultimate Dream Team. Our Father is the Judge. Jesus is our Mediator. The Holy Spirit is our Advocate, our defense attorney, standing close beside us. The prosecutor may be relentless, but he is badly outnumbered, and the Judge loves the defendant.

That changes how we pray.

Three Ways to Pray

In Luke 11 and 18, Jesus taught His disciples to come to God in three different ways, depending on what they needed.

1. **As a Father** (Luke 11:11–13). When you need provision, you need a Father. No good father hands his son a snake when he asks for a fish. “So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (Luke 11:13).
2. **As a Friend** (Luke 11:5–10). When you need a favor, you need a Friend. Jesus told about a man who knocked on his neighbor’s door at midnight because a guest had arrived and he had nothing to set out. The neighbor got up, Jesus said, “because of your shameless persistence” (Luke 11:8).
3. **As a Judge** (Luke 18:1–8). When you need justice, you need a Righteous Judge. Jesus told a story about a widow who kept coming to an ungodly judge until he ruled in her favor, and He told it “to show that they should always pray and never give up” (Luke 18:1). If even a corrupt judge will finally give justice, how much more will God?

So don't you think God will surely give justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?

Luke 18:7

Some of us only know how to come to God one way. We know Him as Father but have never pressed in as a friend at midnight. Or we've begged like a widow but never rested like a child. He is all three.

Why We Need a Righteous Judge

There's a comedy called *Bruce Almighty* that makes this point better than a lot of sermons. Jim Carrey's character is given God's powers for a while and decides the simplest thing to do with everyone's prayers is say yes to all of them. Chaos follows. When the whole city wins the lottery, the prize is worth almost nothing and everyone is angry.

The film is silly, but the lesson isn't. A God who said yes to everything wouldn't be loving. He'd be dangerous. We don't have the wisdom to see where our wishes lead.

God does. He knows when to say no or wait, because He sees how everything connects. That's why Jesus taught us to pray "your will be done." Prayer is not just a wish list. It's alignment. Jesus promised that the Father would give whatever we ask in His name (John 16:23–24), and asking in His name means asking in line with His will and His character.

A judge who grants every request isn't good. He's just compromised.

God's love and righteousness are expressed through refining us, teaching us and sometimes saying no. Real fulfillment comes from becoming disciples, not from getting what we want the moment we want it.

The Trial of Job

So let's go back to the courtroom.

Job was the greatest man in the east. He had seven sons and three daughters, thousands of sheep and camels, hundreds of oxen and donkeys, and a household full of servants. When his children feasted, Job would get up early and offer a burnt offering for each of them, just in case they had sinned in their hearts. That was his regular habit.

Then one day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came with them. And here is the detail I don't want you to miss: it was God who brought up Job's name. Job had no idea.

And look at what God bragged about. Not Job's popularity. Not his influence, his gifts, or how much his neighbors loved him. God boasted that Job was blameless, that he feared God and stayed away from evil.

When we pray, "God, use me," a lot of us really mean, "God, use my gifts and put my talents on display." But God often wants to use our character to display His glory more than our gifts.

Gifts draw crowds. Character builds God's family.

Satan's reply was a sneer. Of course Job fears You. You've put "a wall of protection" around him (Job 1:10).

But reach out and take away everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face!

Job 1:11

So the Lord allowed it, with a limit. Satan could touch what Job had, but not Job himself. In one day Job lost his flocks, his servants and all ten of his children. And still, “in all of this, Job did not sin by blaming God” (Job 1:22).

The Devil Wants Your Testimony

Read Job 1 and 2 slowly, and you’ll see what the enemy was really after. The devil didn’t want Job’s livestock. He didn’t want his children or his servants or even his health. He wanted Job’s testimony and his commitment to God.

That’s still his strategy. Satan is always after our testimony. If he can defile your testimony, he can damage your witness. And if he can discredit your witness, he believes he can discredit the gospel you carry.

“The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy,” Jesus said. “My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life” (John 10:10). Whether we like it or not, we were all born into a war for our souls.

Here’s the good news. You can’t stop the accuser from making suggestions. As an old saying often attributed to Martin Luther puts it:

“You cannot keep birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.”

Attributed to Martin Luther

You can’t keep the devil from whispering. You can choose not to let it nest.

Don’t Put God on Trial

When Satan dragged Job into court, the real danger wasn’t the loss. The danger was what Job might do in response.

When the devil puts us on trial in the courts of heaven, we have to be careful not to return the favor and put God’s goodness and faithfulness on trial.

That’s exactly what the enemy wanted from Job, to curse God to His face. It’s what he tried with Jesus in the wilderness, quoting Scripture and daring Him to make His

Father prove Himself. Jesus answered, “The Scriptures also say, ‘You must not test the LORD your God’” (Luke 4:12).

The word *trial* means a test that reveals what’s really there. Pain and suffering are the crucible that takes the confession of our obedience and reveals its true substance. Even Jesus walked that road: “Even though Jesus was God’s Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). We love to talk about the promise. We don’t love to talk about the process of pain that gets us there.

Job Suffered for What He Did Right

This is the hinge of the whole book of Job, and it changes how we see our own pain.

Many people read Job looking for what he did wrong. Some point to Job 3:25, “What I always feared has happened to me,” and teach that his fear opened the door. Bob Sorge answers that well. What Job feared was the destiny of his children. He offered sacrifices for them and feared they might still reap the consequences of their carelessness. That’s the healthy fear any godly parent carries, not a sin that brought the calamity.

God Himself testified to Job’s integrity, twice. The second time He added, “And he has maintained his integrity, even though you urged me to harm him without cause” (Job 2:3). Then Scripture calls two more witnesses. Ezekiel ranks Job with Noah and Daniel as men of righteousness (Ezekiel 14:14). James holds him up as our example of endurance and reminds us that “the Lord is full of tenderness and mercy” (James 5:11).

“Job suffered, not because of what he did wrong, but because of what he did right.”

Bob Sorge, Pain, Perplexity, and Promotion

If God hadn’t been proud of Job, He would never have brought him up in the first place.

Now, blameless doesn’t mean sinless. Only Jesus can claim that. Job was what I’d call a righteous sinner in training. Even godly people carry a residue of the old nature, and the Father uses trials to purify it. As we saw earlier, God training you and God disciplining you are not the same thing.

But hear this, especially if you're hurting right now. Your suffering may not be a sign that you've done something wrong. It may be a sign that heaven has been talking about you.

Sometimes the fire comes because God bragged on you.

The Job Crucible

None of this means it will make sense while you're in it. Job never saw the courtroom scene. He never heard God brag on him. All he knew was the ashes.

"The Job crucible is a place of great perplexity. When you're in the fire, you don't know where the heat is coming from, or why."

Bob Sorge, Pain, Perplexity, and Promotion

Job couldn't find God anywhere he looked. And yet he said something in the middle of the perplexity that I've clung to more times than I can count:

I go east, but he is not there. I go west, but I cannot find him. I do not see him in the north, for he is hidden. I look to the south, but he is concealed. But he knows where I am going. And when he tests me, I will come out as pure as gold.

Job 23:8-10

My paraphrase is simple: I don't know what I'm doing, but He always finds me.

You may not be able to see the courtroom. You may not know what was said about you before the throne. But your Judge knows the way you're taking, your Advocate is standing beside you, and your Mediator has already paid your debt.

When the accuser reminds you of every failure, remember the woman dragged before Jesus in John 8. Her accusers walked away one by one. Then Jesus asked if anyone was left to condemn her. "No, Lord," she said. And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more" (John 8:11). John wrote later, "Even if we feel guilty, God is greater than our feelings, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:20).

Let the love and truth of God silence the accuser in your life, so you can come boldly to the throne of grace. The trial isn't over yet. But the verdict was settled at the cross, and you will come out as gold.

For the Road

1. Which of the legal words in this chapter (covenant, accuser, advocate, mediator) do you most need to understand right now, and why?
2. Do you tend to come to God mostly as a Father, a Friend or a Judge? What would it look like to come to Him in one of the other ways this week?
3. Where have you been tempted to put God's goodness on trial in your pain? What would it mean to let Him be the Judge instead?

The accuser may bring the charges, but my Father sits on the bench, and He already knows I'll come out as gold.

Job's Friends and the Voice from the Whirlwind

I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes.

Job 42:5

Before Job's friends ever said a word, his wife said one.

His wife said to him, "Are you still trying to maintain your integrity? Curse God and die." But Job replied, "You talk like a foolish woman. Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" So in all this, Job said nothing wrong.

Job 2:9–10

I want to be tender with her. She had just buried ten children too. Grief says things it doesn't mean, and many of us have said worse in our darkest hour. But notice that her advice was exactly what Satan had predicted Job would do: curse God to His face. The accuser often uses the voices closest to us to make his case.

Job's answer is one of the most mature sentences in the Bible. He didn't pretend the pain wasn't real. He just refused to put God on trial for it.

And then his friends showed up.

Weep with Those Who Weep

Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar get a lot of criticism, and much of it is deserved. But they started well. When they first saw Job, they barely recognized him. They wept, tore their robes and threw dust on their heads.

Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and nights. No one said a word to Job, for they saw that his suffering was too great for words.

Job 2:13

That was the best counseling they ever did. The trouble started when they opened their mouths.

For chapter after chapter, the three friends take turns. Their arguments are different, but their conclusion is always the same: before you began suffering, you must have sinned. Find the sin, confess it, and the suffering will stop.

“Job’s three friends all agree on one point: When God’s punishment visits a man, it’s an indicator that that man must be very wicked. Job claimed to be the exception to that rule, but they couldn’t see it.”

Bob Sorge, Pain, Perplexity, and Promotion

The Bible tells us to “be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). It never tells us to figure out what a hurting person did wrong to deserve their affliction. That’s the part Job’s friends got wrong in his dark night of the soul.

When someone you love is in the fire, your first assignment is to sit in the ashes with them, not to diagnose them.

It’s easy for well-meaning believers to do to hurting people what these three did to Job: to go looking for the hidden sin or the missing faith that must explain the pain. Sometimes there is a spiritual root to a problem. But we are not the ones who get to declare it from the outside, and we are almost never the ones who should say it first.

The Righteous Prosper, the Wicked Suffer

Underneath the friends’ speeches was a simple theology: the righteous always prosper and the wicked always suffer. If you’re suffering, you must not be righteous.

We have a modern version of that theology. Prosperity theology teaches that financial blessing and physical well-being are always God’s will for believers, and that faith, positive speech and giving will increase our material wealth. Turn it around and it says the same thing Job’s friends said. If you’re sick or broke, something is wrong with your faith.

Scripture tells a different story.

The righteous person faces many troubles, but the LORD comes to the rescue each time.

Psalms 34:19

Not “the righteous person never faces trouble.” Many troubles. And a God who comes to the rescue.

Jesus spoke to a church that had bought the prosperity story whole. To Laodicea He said, “You say, ‘I am rich. I have everything I want. I don’t need a thing!’ And you don’t realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked” (Revelation 3:17). Their prosperity hadn’t proven God’s favor. It had hidden their need of Him.

“Prosperity cannot always be a proof of God’s favor, since it is what the devil promises to those who worship him.”

Attributed to John Piper

Remember, the devil offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if He would only bow down (Matthew 4:8–9). Wealth and comfort are not proof that you’re on the right road. Sometimes they’re the bait on the wrong one.

If prosperity proved God’s favor, the cross would prove His rejection.

Elihu: Right Theology, Wrong Heart

Then a younger man steps forward. Elihu has been listening the whole time, holding his tongue out of respect for his elders, and now he can’t hold it anymore. For six chapters (Job 32–37) he speaks, and he is different from the other three.

Here’s the case for Elihu, and it’s a strong one.

1. **He brings something new (Job 32).** He rebukes both Job and the three friends, and he insists that real understanding comes from “the breath of the Almighty” (Job 32:8), not from age or experience.
2. **He offers six chapters of theology.** Elihu speaks of God’s justice, His greatness and the purpose of suffering with more depth than anyone before him.
3. **Job never answers him.** Job argued with every word his friends said. With Elihu, he goes silent.
4. **God never rebukes him.** At the end, God is angry with Eliphaz “and your two friends” (Job 42:7). Elihu isn’t mentioned.
5. **He explains righteous suffering.** Elihu develops, more fully than anyone in the book, the idea that suffering can be training, not punishment, a way God speaks to and refines the righteous.

Listen to how he describes it:

He whispers in their ears and terrifies them with warnings. He makes them turn from doing wrong; he keeps them from pride.

Job 33:16–17

But by means of their suffering, he rescues those who suffer. For he gets their attention through adversity.

Job 36:15

That's the heart of this whole book. Many times suffering is not the punishment of an angry God but the grace of a gentle surgeon, cutting away the residue of sin that hides in our hearts and minds. And here's the wonder of it: in God's greatness, power and wisdom, Satan unknowingly and unwillingly partners in our sanctification. The very attack meant to destroy Job became the fire that refined him.

Pain is often a better theologian than prosperity, because suffering reveals what we've really put our hope in.

So was Elihu the hero? Not quite. There are real problems with how he handled Job.

1. **He hadn't been battle-tested in the wilderness.** Elihu had knowledge and zeal, but there's no sign he had walked through anything close to what Job was enduring. Moses spent forty years in Midian before he led anyone. Some wisdom only comes from the furnace.
2. **He wasn't a lover of mercy.** He was more focused on correcting Job than comforting him. "God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7). The Good Samaritan didn't stop to explain the theology of the robbery. He bandaged the wounds.
3. **He lacked self-awareness.** He criticized Job for justifying himself, then spent six chapters announcing how much he knew, even assuring Job, "I speak with all sincerity" (Job 33:3). Peter was sure he'd never deny Jesus, right up until he did.
4. **True answers can still hurt people.** "A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare" (Proverbs 15:1). When Nathan confronted David, he told a story first, and David's heart broke open. We are called to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). The truth alone isn't enough.

So how do we hold both lists together? I believe the answer is this.

You can have the right theology with the wrong heart, and you can have some wrong theology with the right heart.

Elihu said a lot of true things about God. God never contradicted his theology. But notice what God also never did. He never mentioned Elihu at all. Job wasn't asked to pray for him. Scripture never speaks of him again, while Job's righteousness is honored by Ezekiel and James. And it was Job, not Elihu, whom God bragged about to Satan.

Lord, give Your Church the wisdom of Elihu, to understand that we need suffering for divine training and to rejoice in the necessity of the Refiner's fire. But give us Job's heart to carry it, and give us mercy for other people's process.

The Voice from the Whirlwind

Finally, after thirty-some chapters of human opinions, God speaks.

Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind: "Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? Brace yourself like a man, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much."

Job 38:1-4

I like to put it this way: God asked Job, "Is Genesis 1 on your résumé?"

God asks question after question, and they boil down to three.

1. **Can you comprehend My creation?** (Job 38:1-38) Who measured the earth, shut the sea behind its doors and told the morning when to rise?
2. **Can you care for My creation?** (Job 38:39-39:30) Who feeds the lion cubs and the young ravens? Who watches the mountain goats give birth?
3. **Can you control My creation?** (Job 40:6-41:34) Can you bring down every proud person with a look? Can you tame the great beasts of the deep?

Then God turns Job's own complaint back on him. Job had spent chapters asking for a hearing, sure that if he could only argue his case, he'd win. So God hands him the bench for a moment:

Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty.

Job 40:9-10 (NIV)

In other words, if you want to judge the world, go ahead. Bring down every proud person. Crush the wicked where they stand. Then I'll admit that your own right hand can save you (Job 40:11–14). None of us can take that seat. The moment we try, we find out how small our arms really are.

When you put God on trial, you end up discovering you can't even run the courtroom.

What strikes me is what God didn't say. He never told Job about the courtroom in chapter 1. He never explained the why. He didn't give Job an answer. He gave Job Himself.

And it was enough.

Job's Final Response

I know that you can do anything, and no one can stop you. You asked, "Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorance?" It is I—and I was talking about things I knew nothing about, things far too wonderful for me. I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance.

Job 42:2–6

Job had heard about God his whole life. Now he had seen Him. That's what the crucible did. It moved him from hearsay to encounter.

Then God turned to the three friends: "I am angry with you and your two friends, for you have not spoken accurately about me, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7). Think about that. The men who spent the whole book defending God were rebuked, and the man who wrestled, wept and questioned was vindicated. God told the friends to bring sacrifices to Job, and Job prayed for the very men who had wounded him. "When Job prayed for his friends, the LORD restored his fortunes. In fact, the LORD gave him twice as much as before!" (Job 42:10).

God showed more favor to Job, a man who dared to question His justice, endured the crucible and still knew his Redeemer lived, than to men who defended God's character but had never learned obedience in suffering or patience with someone else's process. They were focused on justice. Job had learned to love mercy.

In the middle of his worst chapter, Job had already grasped the gospel:

But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and he will stand upon the earth at last. And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God! I will see him for myself. Yes, I will see him with my own eyes. I am overwhelmed at the thought!

Job 19:25-27

Charles Spurgeon said it like this:

"I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages."

Charles Spurgeon

Jesus and Job

Job's story points beyond itself. Look at how much it foreshadows Jesus.

1. **Innocence amid suffering.** Both were righteous and suffered what they didn't deserve (Job 1:1; Hebrews 4:15).
2. **Divine permission for trials.** Both suffered under God's sovereign allowance (Job 1:12; Acts 2:23).
3. **Testing by Satan.** Satan targeted Job's faith and tempted Jesus in the wilderness (Job 1:9-11; Matthew 4:1-11).
4. **Intercession for others.** Job prayed for his friends; Jesus always lives to intercede for us (Job 42:8-10; Romans 8:34).
5. **Vindication after suffering.** Job was restored double; Jesus rose from the dead (Job 42:10-17; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4).
6. **Submission to God's will.** "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15, NKJV). "Not my will, but yours" (Luke 22:42).
7. **Public mocking and isolation.** Job was scorned by his friends; Jesus was mocked on the cross (Job 16:20; Matthew 27:39-44).
8. **Exemplars of perseverance.** Both are held up for us to follow (James 5:10-11; 1 Peter 2:21-23).
9. **Redemptive outcomes.** Job's trial refined his faith; Jesus' suffering redeemed the world (Job 42:5-6; Isaiah 53:5).

Job shows us a righteous man who suffered and was restored. Jesus is the Righteous One who suffered so we could be restored.

A Pure and Spotless Bride

In Job 31, Job makes his final defense. It's one of the most searching chapters in the Bible, and I see in it a picture of the pure and spotless Bride Jesus is coming back for. Here's what Job claimed:

1. **Purity and integrity.** "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look with lust at a young woman" (Job 31:1).
2. **Honesty and justice.** He had not walked in falsehood or deceit.
3. **Faithfulness.** He had not been enticed by another woman.
4. **Fair treatment of servants.** He listened to their complaints and honored their rights.
5. **Compassion for the needy.** He fed the hungry and clothed the poor, the widow and the orphan.
6. **No idols in his heart.** He had not trusted in his wealth.
7. **Forgiveness and humility.** He never rejoiced when an enemy fell or cursed those who hurt him.
8. **Hospitality.** No stranger ever slept outside his door.
9. **Transparency.** He was willing to be examined and judged by God.
10. **Stewardship.** He never exploited his workers or the land entrusted to him.

Job lived that way under the Old Covenant, without the indwelling Holy Spirit. We have the Spirit living inside us. Perfection isn't possible this side of heaven, but a life of integrity is both our responsibility and, by grace, our possibility.

So if you're in the ashes right now, surrounded by voices trying to explain your pain, take heart. God hasn't stopped speaking. He may not answer every why. But He will come in the whirlwind, and when He does, you'll be able to say what Job said: before, I had only heard about You. Now I've seen You.

For the Road

1. When someone you love is suffering, are you more likely to sit in the ashes with them or to diagnose them? What would it look like to weep with them this week?
2. Where have you seen right theology delivered with the wrong heart, by others or by yourself? How can truth and mercy travel together in your words?
3. Job never got an explanation, but he got an encounter. What would it mean for you to trade your need for answers for a fresh sight of God?

I may never get the why, but in the whirlwind I'll get Him, and He is enough.

Offense with God

And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.

Matthew 11:6 (NKJV)

John the Baptist was sitting in a prison cell.

This was the man who had pointed at Jesus and said, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). He had prepared the way. He had decreased so that Jesus could increase. And now he was locked up in Herod’s prison.

So he sent his disciples to Jesus with a question: “Are you the Messiah we’ve been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?” (Matthew 11:3).

Jesus didn’t send an army. He didn’t send a key. He sent back a report of what He was doing for other people: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is being preached to the poor. Then He added one line, meant only for John: blessed is the one who is not offended because of Me.

Jesus was healing everyone around John, and John was still in chains. He didn’t explain why. He simply offered John a blessing on the other side of offense. *The Passion Translation* puts it this way: the blessing of heaven comes upon “those who never lose their faith in me—no matter what happens!”

That is the invitation of this chapter: to stay unoffended when He doesn’t show up the way we thought He would.

The Wearing Out of the Saints

There’s a conversation in the last book of the Old Testament that sounds like it could have happened in any church parking lot this week.

“You have said terrible things about me,” says the LORD. “But you say, ‘What do you mean? What have we said against you?’ You have said, ‘What’s the use of serving God? What have we gained by obeying his commands or by trying to show the LORD of Heaven’s Armies that we are sorry for our sins? From now on we will call the arrogant blessed. For those who do evil get rich, and those who dare God to punish them suffer no harm.”

Malachi 3:13-15

These were not pagans. These were God’s people. They had obeyed, repented and served, and they were tired. They looked around and saw the wicked prospering and the righteous suffering, and somewhere along the way their weariness turned into an accusation. They didn’t even notice it. “What have we said against you?”

I believe this is one of the great temptations of the last days. Daniel saw a power that would “wear out the saints of the most High” (Daniel 7:25, KJV). The enemy doesn’t always attack head-on. Sometimes he just lets the delays pile up until a weary believer starts to ask the question underneath Malachi 3: if God is sovereign and powerful, why does He let bad things happen to good people?

Forgiving people should be the easy part. They are imperfect, broken beings, just like us. But God is perfect. So when the pain comes, and He could have stopped it, our offense doesn’t stay with people. It climbs all the way to the throne.

Weariness that is never brought to God will eventually become an accusation against God.

Lowering Our Theology to Match Our Pain

Here is the line I have come back to more than any other while writing this book.

When the present doesn’t match the promise, we will be tempted to lower our theology to match our pain.

It happens quietly. We prayed for healing, and it didn’t come, so we decide God doesn’t heal anymore. We trusted Him with a relationship, and it fell apart, so we decide He isn’t really involved in the details. We held on to a promise for years, and it hasn’t happened, so we decide we must have heard wrong, and maybe we hear wrong about everything. Our doctrine shrinks until it is small enough to fit inside our disappointment.

Malachi's generation did exactly this. They weighed their struggles with human wisdom and without the reality of eternity. The psalmist nearly did the same: "For I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness" (Psalm 73:3).

At the root of this temptation is something we don't like to admit: independence. We want to lean on our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5–6). When God's timing or methods defy our expectations, that prideful self-reliance breeds offense and bitterness. God allows trials, not to crucify us beyond repair, but to crush the part of us that trusts in our own sufficiency. His goal is brokenness, never bitterness.

The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God.

Psalm 51:17

Years ago the Lord told me something that changed the way I read my Bible. He said the scriptures that offend me often carry spiritual treasure, because behind every offense with God's Word lies a lie I believe about His goodness and His character.

So now when a verse makes me bristle, I lean in. I ask, "What do I believe about You that makes this hard to accept?" Almost every time, the answer exposes an orphan somewhere in my heart.

Two people can walk through the exact same loss. The same external circumstance that births offense in one heart can provoke spiritual hunger in another. What makes the difference is what we do with God in the middle of it. And Jesus always makes provision for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Running with Men, Running with Horses

Jeremiah once brought God a complaint many of us have made: why do the wicked prosper? God's answer was not what he expected.

If racing against mere men makes you tired, how will you race against horses? If you stumble and fall on open ground, what will you do in the thickets near the Jordan? Even your brothers, members of your own family, have turned against you. They plot and raise complaints against you. Do not trust them, no matter how pleasantly they speak.

Jeremiah 12:5–6

God didn't promise Jeremiah things would get easier. He told him the current season was training for a harder one. That's the word of a Coach who believes in His athlete.

I see two races in that verse, and I believe the last days Church will have to run both of them.

1. Running with men: overcoming offense with man. This is the betrayal of loved ones. Jesus warned that "a brother will betray his brother to death" and that families would turn on each other because of His name, then added, "the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:12-13). Some of the most painful attacks come from the places that used to feel safest.

2. Running with horses: overcoming offense with God. This is the bigger race. And here's the connection most of us miss: if you struggle with offense toward man, you will struggle with offense toward God. The same heart that keeps a record of what people did to it will eventually start keeping a record of what God didn't do for it.

Some time ago I sensed the Lord saying that He was redefining family, uniting those who had not been overcome by the spirit of offense, and that many who had been prodigals in their hearts would find their way back home to His. Offense isn't only a private struggle. It decides who we will be able to walk with in the season ahead.

The race with men is the training ground for the race with horses.

Can You Kiss the Rock of Offense?

Paul quotes Isaiah to describe Jesus with a phrase that should make us uncomfortable.

Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.

Romans 9:33 (NKJV)

Jesus is the cornerstone. He is also the stone people trip over. The same Savior who heals the crowd will sometimes leave you in the prison cell for a while, and every one of us will have to decide whether we stumble over that or build our lives on it.

Psalm 2 ends with a strange command: "Kiss the Son" (Psalm 2:12). A kiss is an act of affection and submission at the same time. So let me ask you the question I've had to ask myself.

**Can you kiss the Rock of Offense when He doesn't show up the way you thought
He should?**

Can you love Him while the promise is delayed? Can you worship Him while the wicked prosper? Can you kiss the hand that allowed the very thing you begged Him to stop?

This is the deepest kind of trust, the kind that says, "I don't understand Your methods, but I know Your heart."

Offense Makes a Hard Heart

Offense doesn't stay offense. Left alone, it hardens.

Pharaoh is the clearest picture of this in Scripture. When the frogs came, he begged Moses to pray for relief. Then this happened:

But when Pharaoh saw that relief had come, he became stubborn. He refused to listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had predicted.

Exodus 8:15

The team at BibleProject has pointed out that in the first five plagues, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart happens by his own will. God gave him opportunity after opportunity to humble himself, and five times Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Only after that does Scripture begin to say that the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, confirming the choice Pharaoh had already made (Exodus 9:12).

That's why the writer of Hebrews pleads with us: "Today when you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts" (Hebrews 4:7).

A cold or hardened heart grows out of offense, unbelief or disobedience. Notice the two ways it happened in the Exodus story. Pharaoh's heart hardened when his pain eased. Israel's heart hardened when God's promises were delayed. One was hardened by relief, the other by waiting.

In this season many hearts will be tempted to grow cold through injustice and divine delay (Matthew 24:12). Seasons like this reveal who never saw His love as the reward of the gospel. Those who trust His goodness will stay tender and overcome bitterness, offense and deception.

Jesus is the gospel. For many, that will not be enough. Let it be enough for you.

Strengthen Yourself in the Lord

David came home to Ziklag and found it burned to the ground. The Amalekites had taken every wife, son and daughter. David and his men wept until they had no strength left to weep. Then the men who had followed him through everything turned on him.

And David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and daughters. But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God.

1 Samuel 30:6 (ESV)

How did David strengthen himself in the Lord? He focused on the truth of God's goodness, faithfulness and promises, not on his circumstance.

And where did he learn that? I believe he learned it long before Ziklag. When Samuel came to anoint one of Jesse's sons, David wasn't even called in from the sheep (1 Samuel 16:6–11). That rejection by his family drove him to the end of himself and into the knowledge of God. The place where the devil wanted to cultivate regret and rejection became the place where God birthed revelation.

So I'll ask you what I've had to ask myself: do you focus on biblical truth or on biblical feelings? Feelings are real, and David wrote psalms full of them. But feelings can't be the foundation.

Skepticism, an attitude of doubt that suspends judgment until something proves itself, sounds intelligent. But skepticism is not a fruit of the Spirit.

After seasons of what feels like denied justice, we'll be tempted to judge God's Word instead of submitting to it. When the devil urged Jesus to make God prove Himself, Jesus answered, "You must not test the LORD your God" (Matthew 4:7).

To test God's Word is to put God on trial.

The Valley of Decision

Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.

Joel 3:14 (NKJV)

In our pain every one of us comes to a valley of decision: offense toward God, or the fear of the Lord. Malachi shows both roads. Right after the bitter words of the weary, something beautiful happens.

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the LORD listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and always thought about the honor of his name. “They will be my people,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies. “On the day when I act in judgment, they will be my own special treasure. I will spare them as a father spares an obedient child.”

Malachi 3:16–17

Same nation. Same injustice. Same delays. One group talked about how unfair God was. The other group talked with each other about how worthy He was, and God leaned in to listen. He wrote their names in a book. We’ll come back to that book in Chapter 18.

The fear of the Lord realigns our hearts. We stop measuring His justice by the world’s value system and stop treating His presence like a participation trophy. He becomes the treasure itself (Psalm 16:11). The wicked may flourish for a season. But the broken and contrite, the ones who are truly wise, “will shine like the stars forever” (Daniel 12:3).

Offense says, “What have I gained?” The fear of the Lord says, “He is what I’ve gained.”

The Prescription: A Revelation of His Beauty

So what is the cure for offense with God? I believe it’s a revelation of His beauty.

Think about Jacob. Laban had two daughters, Leah and Rachel, and Jacob was in love with Rachel. He agreed to work seven years for her.

So Jacob worked seven years to pay for Rachel. But his love for her was so strong that it seemed to him but a few days.

Genesis 29:20

Seven years felt like a few days. That is what love does to waiting.

I see in the two daughters of Laban a picture of two kinds of desire for God: **the lust of His power** and **the love of His beauty**.

The lust of His power looks like Simon in Samaria. When he saw the Spirit given through the apostles' hands, he offered them money: "Let me have this power, too." Peter answered, "May your money be destroyed with you for thinking God's gift can be bought!" and told him his heart was full of bitter jealousy (Acts 8:19–23).

Love is patient, but lust is anxious. Faith in the moment can expedite the will of God, but enduring faith sees God Himself as the treasure in the field and sells everything to taste and see that He is good. True desire for His beauty counts no cost. The lust for power will sell the beauty of God for a bowl of soup, the way Esau sold his birthright.

When the queen of Sheba saw Solomon's wisdom, his house, his table, his servants and his worship, it took her breath away (1 Kings 10:4–5). Jesus said of Himself, "Now someone greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42). He is the ultimate Solomon.

Do you stand breathless in awe of the beauty of God?

I believe there are four revelations of God's character that are so scarce on the earth they keep people from truly knowing His heart. I'll count them down.

- **#4: God's divine justice.** We quickly assume the wicked get away with their sin. They don't. Malachi 3:18 promises we will "again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked."
- **#3: His unfailing love.** Jesus said that if we, being sinful, know how to give good gifts to our children, "how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him" (Matthew 7:11). Yet we often believe we know how to parent better than the uncreated God.
- **#2: God's divine genius.** He reverse-engineers our lives and sees the end from the beginning. "Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD?" (Isaiah 40:13, NKJV). Yet we are often more impressed with our favorite music artist, a Fortune 500 CEO or a top designer than with the God who authored the universe.
- **#1: Promise Keeper.** "God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind" (Numbers 23:19). If He said it, He will do it, even when the timeline is His and not ours.

Jesus is not going to fix all your problems on this side of eternity, because He wants to be the answer to all of them.

Bitter or Broken

Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the LORD, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.

Hosea 10:12 (ESV)

Fallow ground is a field that has sat unplowed so long it has gone hard. Rain runs off it. Seed can't get in. Every farmer knows you can't plant in that field until you break it up.

When it seems like the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, we'll be tempted to become wise in our own eyes and sow seeds of iniquity instead of righteousness. When that happens, a burning heart becomes hard and cold. That's why Hosea commanded the people to break up their fallow ground. Life had become too burdensome, and God's people had become bitter instead of broken.

The Lord wanted their repentance so He could pour out His Spirit and bring revival. Hard hearts miss the season of revival and stay in rebellion. Same rain. Different ground.

Martin Luther King Jr. said it well:

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

Martin Luther King Jr.

So here is my plea to you, as tenderly as I know how. Don't miss what God is doing in this season because you have misdiagnosed the pain of your process as proof that God doesn't keep His promises. Bring Him the questions. Bring Him the tears. Bring Him the weariness before it becomes an accusation. Let the plow break up the hard ground. And then watch what the rain does.

Bitter and broken can look alike for a moment. Only one of them can take in the rain.

For the Road

1. Is there a promise in your life where the present doesn't match what you were told? Have you been tempted to lower your theology to fit your pain, and if so,

where?

2. Think about an offense you are carrying toward a person. How might it be shaping the way you see God?
3. Of the four scarce revelations (His justice, His unfailing love, His divine genius, His faithfulness as Promise Keeper), which one do you most need to see right now? Ask Him to show you.

Blessed are those who are not offended by Him, because the One who leaves us waiting is the One worth waiting for.

PART SIX

Collateral Beauty

What grows out of the ashes?

Collateral Beauty

Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end.

Ecclesiastes 3:11

There's a 2016 film called *Collateral Beauty*.

Howard is a joyful, successful advertising executive until his six-year-old daughter dies. Grief swallows him whole. His marriage ends. He stops sleeping, barely eats, and spends his days at the office building elaborate chains of dominoes and knocking them down. In his anguish he writes three letters, not to people, but to Love, to Time and to Death. He tells Love goodbye. He tells Death it wouldn't take his deal, because he wanted to go in his daughter's place. He tells Time that it used to be a gift and has become a curse.

Meanwhile his company is sinking, and his partners are desperate. So they hire three struggling actors to play Love, Time and Death and answer his letters in person, hoping to prove he's unfit to run the business.

In one scene, a mother sits in a hospital hallway, waiting to lose her daughter. A woman beside her asks who she's losing, and then tells her to make sure she notices the collateral beauty.

Later, when Howard finally rages at Love for betraying him, Love doesn't deny the pain. She tells him she was in his daughter's laugh, and she is also here now, in his grief. The idea behind the whole film is simple. No matter how dark or how difficult the season, something beautiful is happening right there in the middle of it. You just need eyes to see it.

I see in that scene a picture of something cultural Christianity often misses. We tend to treat God like a vending machine: we put in obedience, and He hands out blessings and keeps pain away. But the God of Scripture is present in the storm as surely as in

the sunshine. When Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, terrified, “Moses approached the dark cloud where God was” (Exodus 20:21). Sometimes the place we least expect to find Him is exactly where He’s waiting.

You won’t find the words “collateral beauty” in the Bible, but you’ll find the reality on almost every page.

What Is Collateral Beauty?

Here’s how I define it.

Collateral beauty is the invitation for God to unveil the beauty that is birthed in the darkest, most unjust and most painful seasons of our lives. Those are the seasons when we’ll be most tempted to give up, or to become offended with God and with people. But if we hold on to His goodness when we can’t yet see His promises, He will birth something precious and of eternal value that blesses generations after us.

Solomon said God “has made everything beautiful for its own time.” Notice he didn’t say everything *is* beautiful. Cancer is not beautiful. Betrayal is not beautiful. A miscarriage is not beautiful. All things are not good. But God lives outside of time, and in His power He can take the chaos of life and the crushing seasons, mix them with His sovereignty and His goodness, and make something beautiful that would not have been possible unless we had passed through the furnace.

That was always His plan for His people.

To all who mourn in Israel, he will give a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, festive praise instead of despair. In their righteousness, they will be like great oaks that the LORD has planted for his own glory.

Isaiah 61:3

Beauty grows right out of the ashes.

The Most Important Test You’ll Ever Take

Think back to high school. What was the most important academic test you took to get into college? For most of us it was the ACT or the SAT. Colleges don’t have time to sift through every detail of every application, so the test evens the playing field and shows whether you made up for some bad grades along the way.

So here’s my question. What’s the most important *spiritual* test you’ll ever take?

I believe it's the Collateral Beauty Test.

This test invites us to discover the beauty hidden in the darkest, most disappointing, most crushing seasons of our lives. Those seasons hold invitations to insight, wisdom, endurance and hope, not only for us but for others.

In these seasons, God doesn't necessarily restore what was lost. Instead, He brings forth authority that could not have been obtained any other way than by enduring the loss. The wisdom forged in that trial becomes anointing oil and the key to future breakthroughs, for you and for the people who come after you. The fresh oil of intimacy, cultivated through a new trust and dependence on the Father of lights, becomes a healing balm for others who are crushed by life's hardships.

Here's what makes this test different from every other wilderness test. Often the problem doesn't get fixed on this side of eternity. The person doesn't come back. The diagnosis doesn't change. The marriage isn't restored. So the question isn't whether God will fix it. The question is what we will become.

Pain can become fuel for justice, zeal and a passion to heal the brokenhearted. Or it can become the reason we lower our theology to match our pain.

No one escapes the Collateral Beauty Test. The only question is whether you'll come out bitter or better.

Will you see this season through the eyes of life's unfairness, or through the Father's faithfulness in the middle of life's uncertainties?

Let me ask you a few questions I can't get away from.

If David had never been rejected by his family, would he ever have learned how to strengthen himself in the Lord? Would Joseph have become second in command of Egypt if he had never been sold into slavery? Would we understand the depths of God's love for an unfaithful people without the heartbreak of Hosea and Gomer? Would we understand the war in the unseen realm without the life of Job? Would we know the price of obedience without John the Baptist? Would we know the riches of the reproach of Christ without Moses walking away from the treasures of Egypt?

And what would have been the fate of humanity if Jesus had never gone to the cross?

Every one of those stories was a Collateral Beauty Test. And every one of them blessed generations that the people living them would never meet.

When Chains Become a Catalyst

Let me tell you about a woman I'll call Joelle.

Joelle had been dating a man for nine months. She trusted him enough to move with him, bringing her young daughter along. Then one day, sitting across from her in a restaurant booth, he coldly told her what he really intended. She would pay for their life by selling her body. He threatened her daughter's safety to keep her silent. Her love for her child was turned into a weapon against her, and for years she lived under that exploitation.

But something in her refused to break. She planned her escape carefully, and one day she fled with her daughter, holding on to a sliver of hope.

Today Joelle leads an organization that helps women who've survived trafficking, giving them education, resources and someone who will fight for them. Her pain became a road map to freedom for others. And here's the part I love most: she calls what happened in her life *collateral beauty*. Her past doesn't define her anymore. It fuels her.

That's what passing the test looks like. Misery becomes ministry. Pain becomes purpose. Crushing becomes consecration. Nothing about what was done to her was good. But God did not waste a single tear of it.

The very place the enemy wanted to destroy you can become the door God opens to your destiny.

Rivers in the Desert

I am the LORD, who opened a way through the waters, making a dry path through the sea. I called forth the mighty army of Egypt with all its chariots and horses. I drew them beneath the waves, and they drowned, their lives snuffed out like a smoldering candlewick. "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? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland."

Isaiah 43:16–19

I want you to see how collateral beauty and rivers in the desert belong together.

Think about the Red Sea. Israel stood on the shore with water in front of them and Pharaoh's chariots behind them. Every fact said they were trapped. But a Red Sea moment is when we think we're surrounded by the enemy, when in reality the enemy is surrounded by our God. Moses told the people, "The LORD himself will fight for you. Just stay calm" (Exodus 14:14).

When we see no way out and feel no way out, God does the impossible and makes a way.

I know a couple I'll call Beckett and Liora. For about fifteen years they could not have children. Fifteen years in a dry place. And then they had two babies. That's a river in the desert.

Little battles produce little victories. Big battles produce big victories.

And here's something else about a river in the desert. If there's only one river, there's only one place to get water. The wilderness strips away every other well, until we finally learn what Jesus meant when He said, "Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Tremendous pressure can birth tremendous intimacy, if we'll keep coming back to the only river there is.

Four Pillars Built in a Collateral Beauty Season

When God walks someone through a collateral beauty season, He builds four pillars in their life that they could not have built any other way.

1. Experience.

Experience is what you know because you've lived it, not because you read about it. 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). Moses spent forty years in the wilderness of Midian before he spent forty more leading Israel through one. He was a father in the faith because he had been through it himself. Here's the difference between a teacher and a father: a teacher tells you how to get through the wilderness, but a father takes you by the hand and walks you through it. Many want to give orders. Few are willing to wash feet.

2. Empathy.

Empathy is understanding and feeling what another person carries, even when they can't put it into words. When Jesus came to the tomb of His friend Lazarus and saw Mary weeping, "he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." Then Scripture gives us the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept" (John 11:33, 35, NIV). He knew He was about to raise Lazarus. He wept anyway.

Sympathy says, "I feel bad that you have to drink that bitter cup."

Empathy says, "Do you mind if I drink that bitter cup with you?"

There's a story often told about a little boy who comforted an old man grieving the loss of his wife. When he was asked about it later, the boy said he just walked up and held the man's hand, because he figured the man needed someone to help him cry.

3. Endurance.

Endurance is the capacity to withstand hardship, keep going and recover from adversity. It's the discipline of a marathon runner, not a sprinter. Paul compared the Christian life to a race run for "an eternal prize" (1 Corinthians 9:25). Collateral beauty seasons build staying power more than speed.

4. Eternity.

This is the pillar that holds up the other three.

For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! 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 4:17-18

Paul was beaten, shipwrecked and imprisoned, and he still called his troubles small, because he had weighed them against eternity.

Collateral Beauty or Collateral Damage?

Let me tell you how the movie ends.

Howard finally signs the company over to his three partners, which protects them and lets them prosper. On the surface, that looks like loss. Where's the beauty in that? But Howard's surrender opened the door for those three friends to find collateral

beauty of their own. And Howard himself is finally able to say his daughter's name out loud and weep in the arms of the wife he'd lost.

We often fail to see that when we let a personal tragedy steal our joy, the people closest to us end up paying the price.

A good friend of mine lost a son to stillbirth. I'll never forget what he told me: "I lost my son that day, but I also lost my wife." Only she kept living.

I say this with tenderness, because grief is not a sin, and there is no timetable for a broken heart. Jesus wept. But we owe it to God, and to the people who are still alive and still need us, not to let a tragedy shipwreck our destiny.

If you don't have eyes to see the collateral beauty, your loved ones will become the collateral damage of your bitterness.

How Do I Find the Collateral Beauty?

So how do we do it, practically? When you're in the crushing season, it's hard to see anything beautiful. Here's where I've learned to fix my eyes.

1. **Focus on the victories God has already won.** Meditate on how He has blessed you and carried you in past trials.
2. **Focus on the truth more than the facts.** The facts may be real, but they aren't final. God is a promise keeper.
3. **Focus on God's goodness more than human frailty.** People will fail you. He won't.
4. **Embrace your brokenness rather than your bitterness.** Brokenness keeps your heart soft. Bitterness turns it to stone.
5. **Shift your focus from what has been done to the eternal prize.** What was done to you is not the end of your story.

You have to trust His character when you don't understand His methods.

When the Resurrection Doesn't Come

What's the irony of Good Friday? It's the day Jesus was crucified. The darkest day in human history, the day the Son of God was crushed, is the day we now call good, because of what God birthed out of it. The cross is the ultimate collateral beauty.

But what do you do when you prayed for a resurrection and it didn't come? What do you do when the facts of your circumstance seem to say, "God let you down"?

A mother I'll call Brielle lost her baby daughter, whom I'll call Wren. Two years later she wrote something that has stayed with me ever since. She said that every day apart from her daughter was also a day closer to being with her again. She described days like that anniversary as a collision of the most jarring, devastating grief and an equally jarring, otherworldly gratitude for Jesus. She didn't sugarcoat any of it. She said Jesus was in all of it, helping her carry the weight, sharing her suffering, there at the beginning and through every long valley, and holding her daughter now. He was her hope of glory and her Man of Sorrows. Her daughter's Rescuer, and hers too.

That's what passing the Collateral Beauty Test looks like when the answer was no. It looks like grief and worship in the same breath, with no pretending.

Scripture gives us permission to grieve like that. The book of Lamentations, traditionally credited to Jeremiah, was written over the ruins of Jerusalem, and it holds some of the rawest prayers in the Bible. The writer felt as though God had led him into darkness, walled him in, shut out his prayers and filled him with bitterness, until he cried, "My splendor is gone! Everything I had hoped for from the LORD is lost!" (Lamentations 3:18).

Then, just a few lines later, he turned.

Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning.

Lamentations 3:21-23

He wasn't done hurting. He just decided what he would remember. A few verses later he wrote, "For no one is abandoned by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion because of the greatness of his unfailing love. For he does not enjoy hurting people or causing them sorrow" (Lamentations 3:31-33).

He does not enjoy your pain. He is in it with you. And He is not finished.

When you trust the Lord your God, He turns tragic Fridays into Good Fridays.

For the Road

1. What is the Collateral Beauty Test you are facing right now, or have faced?
Honestly, are you coming out of it bitter or better?

2. Which of the four pillars (experience, empathy, endurance, eternity) has God been building in you through your pain, and who might need what He's built?
3. Who close to you could become collateral damage if you let a past tragedy harden your heart? What would it look like to let them see the beauty instead?

God may not give back what you lost, but He will never waste what you've suffered.

Bowls, Books and Bottles

*You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle.
You have recorded each one in your book.*

Psalm 56:8

Solomon gave some advice that no one would put on a greeting card.

*Better to spend your time at funerals than at parties. After all, everyone dies—
so the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for
sadness has a refining influence on us. A wise person thinks a lot about death,
while a fool thinks only about having a good time.*

Ecclesiastes 7:2–4

Funerals have a way of clearing the fog. Standing beside a casket, nobody asks how much the person made, how many followers they had, or what kind of car they drove. Eternity gets very clear when we're forced to face how short life really is.

Heaven has never measured significance by net worth, by what entertained us, by who we impressed or by the recognition we gained on earth. Heaven measures what carries eternal weight. And Scripture shows us three things God personally keeps:

- **Bowls:** our refined prayers.
- **Books:** our divine conversations.
- **Bottles:** our broken tears.

What earth overlooks, heaven records. What people dismiss, God preserves.

We've spent this whole book in the furnace, the winepress and the wilderness. I want to close by showing you what heaven is collecting while you're there.

Bowls: Refined Prayers

And when he took the scroll, the four living beings and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and they held gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of God's people.

Revelation 5:8

Every prayer offered in faith rises before God like incense. Some of the prayers you've prayed in your crushing season felt like they hit the ceiling and fell back down on your head. They didn't. Even when the answer seems delayed, heaven has not thrown away a single one.

I think it's worth noticing that those bowls are gold, a metal that has to pass through the fire to be pure. The prayers that fill them are often refined too. The prayers we pray in comfort tend to be about our comfort. The prayers we pray in the fire get stripped down to what matters: Your will be done. Don't let me waste this. Make me like You. Those are the prayers heaven treasures.

If you've been praying for years for a prodigal to come home, a body to be healed or a door to open, and you've wondered whether any of it mattered, hear me. Not one of those prayers evaporated. They're in a golden bowl before the throne, and the Lamb who holds the scroll of history is the One they're offered to.

Books: Divine Conversations

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the LORD listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and always thought about the honor of his name.

Malachi 3:16

Earlier we saw the weary saints of Malachi's day, worn out and tempted to believe that serving God was useless. This verse is God's answer to them. While some were complaining, those who feared Him kept talking to each other about Him. And God leaned in to listen. He wrote it down.

Conversations centered on Him are remembered and recorded in heaven. That late-night phone call where you reminded a friend that God is still good. That kitchen table where two of you prayed through tears. Heaven was taking notes.

I've heard it said this way: if you believe John 3:16, it will birth Malachi 3:16, which will blossom into 1 John 3:16. God's love for us produces conversations about Him, and those conversations produce lives laid down for each other. John put it plainly: "Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions" (1 John 3:18).

Bottles: Broken Tears

God does more than see our suffering. He gathers every tear. No hidden sorrow, no painful wandering, no costly act of obedience is forgotten.

There's a forgotten Kingdom truth here: breakthrough is born in broken tears.

God does not respond to human strength, influence or intellect. He responds to hearts that are broken, repentant, humble and dependent on Him. Tears are the language of a soul that has finally realized that apart from Him we can do nothing, and there is no weakness in them.

Look at how often Scripture honors tears. When God was about to judge Jerusalem, He told His messenger to "put a mark on the foreheads of all who weep and sigh because of the detestable sins being committed in their city" (Ezekiel 9:4). Paul wrote to the Philippians "with tears in my eyes" about those who live as enemies of the cross (Philippians 3:18). Through the prophet Joel, God called His people, "Don't tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead" (Joel 2:13).

I call this the gift of tears. Tears become liquid prayer. They soften the heart and give us patience and empathy for other people's process.

Heaven is moved by brokenness far more than by ability, position or achievement. True authority is forged in secret places of weeping.

Never forget that the God who collects your tears has cried His own. Two of the most powerful phrases in all of Scripture are "Jesus wept" and "Christ crucified." The God of absolute power was willing to weep beside a grave and then be crushed on a cross, out of love for the people made in His image. That's why we never pray to a God who can't relate.

This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.

Hebrews 4:15–16

And one day the God who bottled every tear will wipe them away for good. John saw it: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever” (Revelation 21:4).

The Privilege of Being Prepared

It takes less than five seconds to say, “I know how you feel.” But it takes seasons of crushing and purified character to give those words real weight.

A friend I’ll call Marlowe lost her mother suddenly when she was eighteen. It took her about a decade of grief to climb out of the rubble and rebuild a life she never asked to redesign.

Years later, another friend I’ll call Annika was going through her own crushing. She and her husband, whom I’ll call Callum, had taken a costly stand for their convictions in a painful family situation. It cost them dearly. They were labeled judgmental, their reputations were smeared, and Annika lost her job in ministry. Staring at a stack of unpaid bills and an empty bank account, she wondered whether integrity was worth the price.

That’s when Marlowe looked at her, with tears in her eyes, and said, “I know how you feel.”

Annika held on to those words like an anchor, because they weren’t cheap. They carried the weight of Marlowe’s own unraveling, the ache of choosing to trust God instead of becoming offended, and the hope that her suffering could become oil for someone else’s wilderness. As Marlowe put it, “The oil from our crushing seasons isn’t just for us. It’s fuel to heal others.”

That’s exactly what Paul said.

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.

2 Corinthians 1:3–4

So often we diagnose our pain, suffering and disappointment as trauma. In reality, God wants to use it as our training for triumph. Trouble may last for a moment or a season, but unresolved trauma can last a lifetime. Our triggers often reveal how deep that unresolved pain goes. God doesn't just shuffle our trauma around. Sometimes He lets us be triggered so He can take us through the training of a renewed mind, and on to triumph. The comfort you received in your darkest season was never meant to stop with you.

Your crushing is preparing you to say “I know how you feel” to someone who desperately needs to hear it.

The Treasure of Pain and the Treat of Pleasure

It was by faith that Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to share the oppression of God's people instead of enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin. He thought it was better to suffer for the sake of Christ than to own the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to his great reward.

Hebrews 11:24–26

Moses had the palace, the education, the wealth and the name. He walked away from all of it. Why? Because he had seen a greater treasure.

Jesus lived the same way. “Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests,” He said, “but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20).

Paul said that God “uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume,” and that our lives are “a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God” (2 Corinthians 2:14–15). Perfume, like oil and wine, has to be pressed out of something. A life that has chosen the reproach of Christ over the pleasures of Egypt carries a fragrance that a comfortable life never will.

When the righteous willingly accept reproach and rejection for His sake, it's a sign in heaven and on earth that He is regarded as the true reward. The treat of pleasure lasts

a moment. The treasure of pain, suffered for His name, lasts forever.

Driven by Eternity

When you're in your twenties and thirties, you're usually hoping God will change your external circumstances. By your forties and fifties, you start to realize God has been trying to change your perspective on your external circumstances. To understand His plans for your life, you have to focus on eternity, not just your earthly plans.

God is driven by eternity, not by success. That's why He will sometimes let our comfort, safety and convenience be disrupted to launch us into our destiny. While we strive for comfort, convenience and control, He is after character, faith and endurance.

Suffering is one of His loudest reminders that earth is not our home. "But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior" (Philippians 3:20). The trials we face loosen our grip on this world and set our hearts on the one to come.

Paul endured shipwrecks, prison and beatings, and yet at the end of his life he wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me" (2 Timothy 4:7-8). A fish pulled out of water flops and struggles because it was made for somewhere else. Some of the restlessness you feel in this world is there because you were made for another one.

Live for a crown that lasts forever, not one that's only temporary.

Before God Fills His House, He Cleans It

Jeremiah Johnson has described a dream in which he was visited by two angels, one of cleansing and one of glory. The first angel told him the second visitation depended on how the first was received:

"God will NOT fill His house with His glory until His house receives the cleansing and purification He desires to bring."

Jeremiah Johnson

I believe that's the season we're in. Before God fills His house, He cleans His house.

Think of King Josiah. He became king at eight years old, and in the eighteenth year of his reign he sent workers to repair the Temple. While the Temple was being repaired,

the high priest found the Book of the Law. When it was read to Josiah, he tore his clothes in grief, because he realized how far God's people had drifted from what God had said (2 Kings 22:8–13). The restoration of the house led to the rediscovery of the Word, and the rediscovery of the Word led to repentance.

That's what the Refiner's fire does. It cleans the house so the glory can come. We want the glory without the cleansing, the outpouring without the consecration. But the lack of power in so much of the Church is tied to a lack of consecration. If you've felt God sweeping through the rooms of your heart in this season, turning things over and carrying things out, don't resist Him. He's getting your house ready to be filled.

The Harlot and the Consecrated Bride

Jesus is drawing a line in the sand. In the days ahead, I believe there will be two kinds of people in the Church, and Scripture describes them as two brides.

The harlot bride is married to the world and looks like Babylon. She lives with sexual immorality, drunkenness and pride, and she is tolerant of sin and relaxed about morality and biblical doctrine. She loves money, puts her feelings above what the Bible says, and twists Scripture to fit her own will. She trades truth for comfort and entertainment, and purity for popularity.

The consecrated bride is in love with Jesus and completely devoted to Him. She is led by the Holy Spirit and calls Him her friend. She denies the temporary pleasures of this world for a greater satisfaction in God. She believes God's Word about marriage between a man and a woman, is sober-minded and alert, flees from sin and loves holiness. She shakes people out of complacency and confronts idolatry. She craves intimacy with God, rests secure in the Father, and wins His trust.

I don't share that to shame anyone. Every one of us has drifted toward the world at some point, and the Bridegroom paid for all of it at the cross. His invitation is still open. What separates the two brides is whether they let the Refiner do His work, not whether they ever failed.

That's what this whole book has been about. The crushing, the fire, the wilderness and the weight room were never meant to destroy you. They're how God makes a bride ready for her Bridegroom. Every prayer you've prayed in the furnace is in a golden bowl. Every conversation about His goodness is in a book. Every tear is in a bottle.

And something else is being collected too. When olives are crushed, they yield oil. That's where we'll finish.

For the Road

1. Which of heaven's three treasures (bowls, books or bottles) has God been filling in your life during your hardest season? How does it change things to know He's keeping them?
2. Who comforted you with the comfort they had received from God? Who might need you to say "I know how you feel" right now?
3. Is there anything in your heart's "house" that the Lord wants to clean before He fills it? What would it look like to let Him?

Heaven is keeping every prayer, every conversation and every tear, and none of them will be wasted.

Oil from the Press

*Then Jesus went with them to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and he said,
“Sit here while I go over there to pray.”*

Matthew 26:36

On the night before the cross, Jesus went to a garden on the Mount of Olives. Its name was Gethsemane. In Aramaic, Gethsemane means “oil press.”

I don’t think that’s an accident. In that garden the Son of God was pressed until His sweat fell like great drops of blood (Luke 22:44). He asked the Father if there was any other way. And then He prayed the prayer that changed history: “Yet I want your will to be done, not mine” (Luke 22:42).

Out of that press came the oil that heals the world.

How Oil Is Made

In the ancient world, olive oil was made by crushing. The olives were gathered, piled into a stone basin, and ground under a heavy millstone. Then the pulp was pressed under great weight until the oil ran out. The first pressing was the purest, set apart for the lamps in the Temple and for anointing kings and priests.

There is no oil without the press. You can admire olives on a tree all day long, and you’ll never get a drop of oil from them. Something has to be crushed.

That is the story of this whole book. The grapes are crushed into wine. The silver goes into the fire. The wheat is threshed. The olives are pressed. And what comes out of the crushing is the very thing God uses to bring light, healing and joy to others.

The press isn’t the end of your story. It’s where the oil comes from.

The Oil No One Can Lend You

Jesus told a story about ten bridesmaids waiting for a bridegroom. All ten had lamps. All ten fell asleep. But when the shout went up at midnight, only five had oil. The

others turned to the wise ones and begged, “Please give us some of your oil because our lamps are going out.” And the wise ones answered, “We don’t have enough for all of us” (Matthew 25:8–9).

I used to think that sounded a little selfish. Now I understand. Oil can’t be lent, because oil is made in a press, and no one can be pressed for you.

I’ve come to believe that the oil in our lamps is not only the oil of daily intimacy with Jesus, though it is that. It is also the oil that came out of our crushing: the trust we learned in the dark, the tears we cried in His presence, the endurance we gained in the wilderness, the comfort we can now give because we were comforted.

Nobody can borrow that from you, and you can’t borrow it from anyone else. But you can share the light it gives. That’s what collateral beauty is.

No one can lend you their oil, because no one can be crushed for you.

Except One

And yet there is One who was crushed for us.

“But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed” (Isaiah 53:5). The pain you carry is real, but it is not the deepest crushing in the universe. That happened in a garden called the oil press and on a hill outside Jerusalem. Because He was crushed, your crushing will never have the last word. Because He rose, the fire you’re in is a refining fire, not a destroying one.

A Blessing for the Road

So here is my prayer for you as you close this book.

May you know that your Father is close to the brokenhearted, and that He is close to you. May you trust His character when you can’t understand His methods. May the fire burn away only what was never you, and leave everything He put there. May your crushing become wine for the weary and oil for the wounded. May you come out of your wilderness leaning on your Beloved. May you never lower your theology to match your pain, but let your pain lead you deeper into His heart. And when the

Bridegroom comes at midnight, may your lamp be full of oil that was pressed out of a life surrendered to Him.

Keep your lamp burning.

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