

GOD ON DISPLAY

OUR CURE FOR SIN, OUR ANCHOR IN SUFFERING

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CONTENTS

<i>Thanksgiving</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Chapter 1: All Things Revolve Around God's Glory.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Chapter 2: Laboring in God's Word</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Chapter 3: Enduring Grace for Trials</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>Chapter 4: Suffering, Trusting, and Resting</i>	<i>53</i>
<i>Chapter 5: Idols, Worship, and Addiction</i>	<i>71</i>
<i>Chapter 6: Roots and Fruits.....</i>	<i>90</i>
<i>Chapter 7: Living in the Sanctuary.....</i>	<i>109</i>
<i>Chapter 8: Leveraging the Sanctuary</i>	<i>121</i>
<i>Chapter 9: A Rescue that Spreads</i>	<i>140</i>
<i>Appendix 1: Practical Matters.....</i>	<i>144</i>
<i>Appendix 2: Putting Scripture into Practice</i>	<i>149</i>

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THANKSGIVING

I'd like to take a moment to give thanks to some people who have significantly shaped this curriculum either directly or indirectly.

Thank you to those teachers (living and dead) who are faithful to the Word, whom I've never met but have certainly grown from. To name a few: David Powlison, Paul Tripp, Timothy Lane, John Piper, Mike Wilkerson, A. W. Tozer, John Owen, and Jonathan Edwards.

I'm really thankful for Treasuring Christ Church in Raleigh, where teaching and frequent, everyday examples of treasuring the gospel were like fertilizer to us. It was the first time we saw the gospel doing real things in real life.

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Shannon, you're my one and only. You stick with me even though only you truly see the mess of my times of self-fixation, anxiety, and depression. You show me God's faithfulness and compassion in a way nobody else ever will. Your beauty, patience, and shameless optimism are necessary gifts to me. I love you so much.

God, who am I that you would choose me not only to see Jesus but to actually trust Him? I will forever question, "why me?" You captured me with your gospel, and I can never be the same, nor do I wish to be. I can't wait until heaven. Keep us awake, and come quickly!

INTRODUCTION

I feel stuck. Change seems impossible. I can't trust anybody. I am overwhelmed. I don't know where I'm going. I can't make sense of why this happened to me. I feel so worthless. I can't let go of my anger. Each of us is approaching this season for different reasons, from different struggles, and from different contexts.

The good news is that we share our cure in common.

WE CHANGE AS WE GAZE ON GOD

We desperately need to see God. This season, we will put God on display for you. If you don't know much about God, rest assured that this doesn't put you at a disadvantage. Quite the contrary, I believe you have a big advantage. Your eyes are not likely to passively glaze over the gospel¹ that most of us in the South take for granted and roll our eyes at. There may be times in this curriculum when I talk about something that doesn't make sense to you as you read it. I try to write out the meanings of various "Christianese" words when I use them in case you haven't heard them before or feel iffy about what they really mean. Please don't hesitate to ask your leader to clarify anything in here. There's no mocking here. We all stand on equal footing as needy beggars before God, utterly depending on Him for everything. It's better to ask than to remain confused about something.

We will put God on display for you this season because the Bible teaches us that by the very act of gazing on who God really is, we actually *change*! Think about the simplicity of that. It's shocking. As I think on God, as I come to Him, as I drool over the many unbelievably good things He has done, who I am at my very core *changes*. Seeing God ever more clearly in the gospel of what Jesus Christ² has done for us is our only hope to endure suffering well and escape our sin. Our very desires change. Our deepest delights change. Our lifelong goals change. With our eyes and joys fixed on God, we increasingly break free from the chains of sin, becoming ever more like Jesus. As we gaze on God, obedience becomes a pleasure instead of a restraint.

You may come here wondering how you're going to work your way out of whatever mess you're in. Yet, as bizarre as it may sound, you're actually going to end up gazing, enjoying, sheltering, and resting your way out of sin, delighting in another's work instead of depending to your own. We look for endless things to do that make sense to us, and then we meet Jesus, who says things like, "Come to me. Gaze on me. Get to know me. Trust me. Join me." Be prepared for a paradigm shift. Think less about the work you're going to do and more about the God you're going to enjoy.

WHAT NEEDS CHANGING?

"Sin" is the disease at the core of who we are, in which we ignore, dislike, and distrust God. The word, sin, can communicate two things. It can communicate a *state of being*: I have a disease in which I ignore and dislike God. It can also communicate an *action*: I disobey God in tangible ways. We commit sinful actions because of our sinful state. Sin also *separates* us from God, and that *separation* is sin's greatest damage. Sin hates the idea of God being seen and

loved. It seeks to suppress Him and defraud Him both to ourselves and to other people. Because of this, we are separate from God and don't belong with Him. Because you and I were wired by God to be *close to Him*, being diseased with sin means that we are broken and dying. Sin is what causes us to hate and distrust God when terrible things happen to us. Sin separates us from the powerful and compassionate refuge of God when we suffer. It is why suffering is so bitter for us. Above all else, it is *sin* that need to be rescued from.

You may have come here hoping that your circumstances will change. Perhaps you want your spouse to be more present, your kids to obey better, your roommate to get a clue, your boss to calm down, your depression to loosen up, your anxieties to calm, your lust to go away, your substance addiction to break, your body to look more acceptable, or your bank account to go back into the black. These aren't bad in and of themselves. But it's crucial to realize that our real problem is sin, and we carry it with us wherever we go. A tough circumstance may not actually be your problem, but your distrust toward God in that circumstance *is*. Don't get me wrong. God cares about our troubles more deeply than even we ourselves do. He doesn't ignore them. They matter. Still, what matters most is whether we see and trust God. Sin is out to derail that intimacy and trust with God. That is why *sin* is our problem.

We are rescued from sin as we see God, gaze on Him, and taste the amazing things He has done for us through Jesus Christ. This message of what Jesus has done, is doing, and will do is the "gospel." Truly hearing the gospel means we truly see who God is, trust Him, and *change*!

"Redemption" means to free someone from captivity by paying a ransom. Jesus Christ redeems all who trust Him by *paying* the debt that weighs against them. The debt is there because of sin and sinful actions, and Jesus pays this to *release* us from sin's captivity. We also use the word "redeem" more conversationally today to convey something broken being remade and turned into something beautiful. I like that meaning too, because this also describes what Jesus does for us. I will use redemption and rescue almost interchangeably, but this is what it means. I like "rescue" because it's a word we all tend to immediately understand. It simultaneously communicates our desperate plight and God's unearned, invasive act of love.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS CURRICULUM

I intend this to give a spur toward seeing God more clearly and intimately with community. This book is geared toward the difficulties I've had personally and the ones I've seen here at Legacy Church. I've heard a lot of questions here about what we actually *do* in redemption and what things are supposed to *look like*. I hear misconceptions, I hear frustration, and I hear timidity and apprehension. We seem to understand that we cannot do things in order to earn God's grace³. But under grace, we don't seem to understand what we're actually commanded to *do*. It's the actual *doing* by faith⁴ that trips us up the most.

As you read through this curriculum, you may notice an odd focus on mission⁵ and God's glory⁶. There's a reason for that. We are inherently missionaries for what we gaze on and love. We do it for sin instinctively, and we do it for Jesus as well when we truly treasure Him. My

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greatest hope is to imitate the Apostle Paul and strive directly for your obedience of faith for the sake of God's name in all the Earth. May your desires for God well up powerfully to put Him on display and further His redemption on Earth. There can be no other result of redemption. A redemption without joyful mission is no more than a hoax. A heart rescued from sin is the same as a heart deeply enamored with God. To be drawn out of sin and brought to God Himself is one direction, one motion, and one act.

PRACTICALITIES

Anything in a **gray box** is an opportunity to interact with questions or actions to put the curriculum into practice in real life. There are questions to get the juices flowing for group discussion time, and they are scattered throughout each chapter. Please take the questions slowly and think through them. They're meant to probe where you're at and how things are affecting you. There is also a tangible "Action" at the end of each chapter intended to help you put that chapter into practice in your daily life. I'm a firm believer that if something doesn't impact my daily life, then it didn't really impact me at all. So I want this book to be as practical as possible in spurring you toward a more Godward daily life in community. For each week, please read the chapter beforehand, let the questions at the end help spur our discussion for the next group meeting, and let the action help give you ideas for real-life obedience the week after that. All scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®) © 2001 by Crossway.

HOW MUCH EFFORT WILL THIS SEASON TAKE?

In total, this curriculum is about 80,000 words. I hear that even slow readers read at around 150 words per minute. I'm not much above that rate myself, by the way. What this means is that you'll average at most forty-five minutes to one hour per week reading this curriculum over the course of the season. That's not very much time to ask for, even for helplessly busy people. If you consider group time, scripture reading, planning things out, and working through things with the Lord, I can't imagine things taking more than four to five hours per week total. Also, a lot of the praying and planning you can do during a commute or other downtime throughout the day. You can even listen to scripture on free Bible apps during your commute. So that's what we're asking you to commit to this season: four to five hours per week. We know that it's a sacrifice, and we will do our best to pray for you, lead you, and help this time be fruitful.

ACTUALLY DOING THINGS

I cannot emphasize enough that it's really important that you actually do the Action sections. At Legacy Church, we struggle with practical obedience in the small areas of life when nobody's looking. "Enjoying God" seems awkward. Reading the Word seems strained. Being honest to another seems risky and unnatural. Prayer seems detached. All of this is the case largely because we *aren't actually doing it*.

Yet, these form the core of redemption. The Action sections at the end of each chapter are meant to get you into the rhythm of simply obeying God in simple trust that He is powerful

enough to handle the big, looming struggles for you. They're even more important than the chapter. Seriously. Also, the group discussions are meant to discuss at the ground level how the actions are going and how to live out the chapter in *real* life. If you aren't trying to live things out, it mutes our discussions, and it circumvents the main benefit of this season. So I urge you, please strive to live out the Action sections. It won't be perfect, but it will be powerful.

PLEASE WRITE THINGS DOWN

I encourage you to be as detailed and concrete with things as you can, to really pull truths and ideas down to the ground level where you live, to envision how they truly impact your life. Please write things down and work through things slowly in God's presence. Writing might seem hokey, or it might seem irrelevant, but it anchors the thoughts, and it helps you order things that seem otherwise fuzzy. There's a lot of benefit in scripting out and dreaming out in words how you envision in-the-moment repentance living out: your prayers, your emotions, your difficulties, your actions, and so on. It's so important during this season to get external input and external output. This means *reading or listening* to the Word or trustworthy books/sermons, and it means *writing and speaking* out loud, even if only to yourself. It gets us out of our heads, and it makes a difference. I'm not asking you to journal, and I'm not assuming you'll later read the stuff you write. I'm asking you to be real, and writing is a huge help with that.

It's remarkable how clear things that were previously "fuzzy" become when we come to God empty-handed, begging for grace, and striving to learn more deeply who He really is and what that means for real life. We don't "get on top of things" in the sense of magically figuring everything out, but we certainly do get a handle on sin, lose respect for sin's power, get a much clearer view of God, and become more intimate with God. Never forget that the goal is deeper intimacy with God. Sin separates us from Him. That's why we war against sin.

CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S POWER

Finally, by the end of this curriculum, it's my hope that you get a few strong battles against sin under your belt in daily life. It's powerful to figure out what it's like to endure by faith, to kill a sinful desire in the moment by running to God when you would otherwise have caved. You get a taste in your mouth of what redemption will look like for years to come: that gritty interruption of sin by running to God's sanctuary⁷ and finding overwhelming desires for a God you never expected. It's awesome to get stoked over passage of scripture you just can't shake, to practically drool over God as you read it. These are things that give you the feel of redemption, that put a righteous chip on your shoulder, a confidence not in your innate power but in Jesus's power over sin. My hope is that these kinds of things would begin here and then keep growing in your community group.

Our goal is to transition you toward deeper realness and intimacy with those in your community group so that you are doing the same things we do here with some people in your community. We want your growth to be lifelong.

¹ The “gospel” is the “good message” of what Jesus has done for us.

² The word “Christ” is the Greek word for “Messiah” or “anointed one.” It’s referring to the king the Jews were waiting for to rescue and unite them. And this Christ, this Messiah, is the Jesus we read about in the New Testament. Christ, Jesus, and Jesus Christ all refer to the same person.

³ “Grace” refers to the good things God gives us without us deserving them.

⁴ “Doing by faith” or “obedience of faith” are meant to convey that we do things because we *trust* the God who told us to do them. It is the opposite of doing things because we “have to” in order to get something or keep from losing something. “Obedience by faith” happens out of things we’ve *already received and cannot lose!*

⁵ “Mission” really just means “goal.” If I am “on mission,” I am striving hard to achieve a goal. The question is: what is that goal? God has goals, and when I mention “mission,” I am usually talking about joining God to achieve His goals.

⁶ God’s “glory” means the beauty, brilliance, and awe of who He really is as a Person. He most richly expresses His glory in the storyline He’s crafted throughout history, where we experience who He is through how He’s interacted with mankind.

⁷ The “sanctuary” is the place set apart within the Hebrew temple where God *dwells*. When you read “sanctuary,” think “this is where God’s presence is, where He lives.”

CHAPTER 1: ALL THINGS REVOLVE AROUND GOD'S GLORY

CHRISTMAS MORNING

Imagine yourself for a minute as a child. Christmas is fast approaching, and for some odd reason this year, your parents have really been building the hype over the presents. Each day, you hear another rendition of, "You really won't believe what you're getting!" Each day, your heart races a little more, and your limbs break out into spasms of excitement from time to time. At long last, Christmas morning arrives, and you "wake up" (as if you'd actually slept) far earlier than any human being should ever be awake. You rush into the living room only to find the bottom of the tree empty. Of course, you assume your parents are about to enter with a huge gift with paper draped awkwardly over it. But they enter without an awkwardly wrapped gift. Your dad finally asks, "Are you ready for your gift?" to which you cry, "Yes!" Your dad then says, "You get to have *me*!"

And your head just hangs with disappointment.

I think that story captures the likely reactions to this chapter. For sure, the analogy breaks down as all do, but the *reaction* to where this season is leading you can be a feeling of disillusionment. We get really excited about getting God's "things." But the idea of getting God Himself seems strange. We dream of a heaven that has things, while 1 Peter 1 shows us a heaven that is actually a *Person*. We come here with a heavy burden on our hearts and expectations of what will happen. And what God is going to meet you with here is a loud exclamation of, "You get *Me*!" We come with expectations of circumstances getting easier, addictions making logical sense, gaping holes being filled immediately, suffering making sense, and temptations ceasing. And these all collide with a God who seemingly brushes past them, saying, "Be really happy, my daughter, my son, because you get *Me*!"

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Our temptation is to hang our heads in disillusionment, asking a thousand questions that start with: "But what about ...?" Friend, God has not forgotten your needs. He created them. He defines them. He knows them. It can feel like a train wreck as our expectations collide head long into God's actual provision. But I hope you'll grow to realize God is meeting you in the deepest need you likely never knew you had: to *know* and *be with* the God for whom you were created. He isn't devaluing you by focusing on Himself as He meets you. He isn't ignoring your pain and your plight. Like a wise parent, He knows what you need the most even when you do not. Knowing God will speak to your deepest troubles with a power you never expected. "Who He is" is the gift you didn't know to ask for. Suffering and temptation might not cease. But His promise to be *with* you is your moment-to-moment refuge that overwhelms it all.

I've asked quite a few questions in response to my own confrontation that literally everything in life revolves around God's glory. I'm sure you're asking your own. For instance:

- How can an invisible God apply to sexual lust, body image, physical abuse, drug addiction, or depression? Isn't He far removed, and doesn't He only apply to "spiritual" things?
- I thought most of that stuff was supposed to apply to heaven. What in Christ do I have to grab onto here and now?
- I still long for the familiarity of how sin seems to meet what I desire so quickly, even if I regret it afterward. How can God change that?
- The pain is so intimate and near that I'm not sure I can trust Him with it. I fear letting go of *control* in particular. How can I trust Him?

We'll get there over the course of this season. But for now, it suffices to say that all of life revolves around God's glory. God displayed and God trusted is our only and greatest hope. I hope you learn throughout this season how powerful it is to see God for who He really is and to enjoy Him often during seemingly mundane life. Seeing God clearly changes things more tangibly than you probably ever imagined.

WHAT IS GOD'S GLORY?

"God's glory" is who God is. It is what He's like, what He can do, the promises He's made, and how He's been faithful in the past. This is not just a *list* of things about Him that we quickly run through. It's a rich *narrative* into which our own lives are written. I can say that God is powerful, but it means nothing unless I see how He created the universe out of nothing¹, how He gave Abraham a son when he was too old to produce one², how He delivered Israel out of Egypt by miracles³, and how He raised Jesus not only from death to life but from Earth to heaven⁴. I can say He has made great and precious promises⁵, but they don't come alive until I see how much I need rescue from a just punishment for sin, from the power sin holds over me, and from empty pursuits that leave me depleted⁶. I can say He rescues His people, but it actually means something when I see Him make a distinction between Israel and Egypt⁷, when I see how He provides despite Israel's grumbling⁸, and when I see how Christ exchanges places with helpless sinners like me⁹.

God is the main character not only of the biblical storyline but of ours today as well. Who God is and what He is like speaks intimately to every detail of our daily lives. You'll come to find that what you behold¹⁰ during life's mundane times will speak volumes to the larger struggles you have. Beholding, treasuring, and displaying His glory in *everyday things* are not side issues. They are the very heart of His rescue. On these things, our striving should be focused.

GOD AT THE CENTER OF ALL THINGS

If I were to ask you what God loves most in this world, what are the first things that come to your mind? Probably people, justice, compassion, the hurting, the abused, or the orphaned. For sure, He loves each of these very much. As you read through the Word, though, what surfaces at the very top is that He loves *Himself*.¹¹ He protects the orphaned and grieves for the broken, yet above all He protects *His name*. I know how jolting that idea may be for you. I shared the same confusion for a long time, and I still go through it in my mind from time to

time. Yet it's probably the most clear biblical truth we have, and it turns out that it is extremely good for God's people that He love and protect His name most. Let's take a deeper look.

CAPTIVE TO LOVING EVERYTHING BUT GOD

I begin with this teaching for important reasons. First, this is the most glaring theme in the entire Bible from beginning to end: that all things, including God Himself, revolve around God's glory, His display. How can we start with anything else? Redemption *is itself* a renewed view and enjoyment of God. Second, our captivity to sin begins with our eyes and hearts being eclipsed from God's glory¹². We are given over as captives to an inability to see Him for who He is or even desire to see Him. Absent from God, we desire everything but Him, and we focus mostly on ourselves.

His absence actually *defines* our brokenness. St. Augustine wrote this to God: "You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."¹³ Our eyes were created to find their greatest awe in gazing on God. Our desires were created to be finally and fully satisfied by God. *He* is the fulfillment intended to calm our hungry hearts and still our endless wrestling. If you rip Him out of the equation, all we have left is insatiable hunger and endless wrestling. It sounds a lot like life today, doesn't it? That's why we need to begin with His glory. We need to know who He *really* is.

The problem, the problem beneath all problems, the one source of chaotic devastation in our lives (which we call sin), is that we live absent of the God for whom we were made. From this we need rescue because we have earned a punishment we cannot shake, a debt we cannot pay, and a filth we cannot clean. We are unable to escape this without a Rescuer paying our debt, killing our captor, giving us new hearts, and continually sustaining us by His presence, guiding, and revealing. This concept alone will take us very far in redemption. It clarifies and orders otherwise confounding sins and sinful reactions to suffering in our lives.

It even explains why the concept of God loving Himself rubs us all so raw when we hear it. We are captive to delighting in our own selves, in our pleasure, and in creation. No wonder the idea of delighting in God Himself (rather than His things) seems so foreign, inapplicable, and detached to us. But the Holy Spirit is not stayed or intimidated by our captivity to sin. He is powerful to reveal God to us in such a way that our new hearts, rescued by Christ according to the Father's plan before time, spring forth in vibrant faith, joy, and desperation for God Himself above anything in creation. It is God being put on display in the gospel of Jesus's atonement¹⁴ that disarms our sin and our distrust during suffering. We come to really know God. Knowing Him, we trust Him. Trusting Him, we obey Him with joy. Obeying Him, we display Him.

GOD LOVES HIMSELF

It sounds pompous and arrogant of God to be most loving and protective of Himself, doesn't it? But I want to stress that this is not the same as if you and I were all about *ourselves*. For one, God actually *is* worth the attention and adoration of the whole universe. He is self-sustained, overflowing, and secure. It's not as though He needs us because He feels inadequate. God is not the play yard bully who overcompensates for his insecurities. His anger is not aroused from His lack. It is aroused from *justice* and *love* toward us. He is just in His anger

because we dethroned the only one worthy of our worship. He is loving because He will not settle for us striving after everything but Him, remaining unquenched.

It seems deterring at first glance, but there are some questions I want to ask. First, who or what is more worthy of God's love than Himself? Are ideals more worthy of God's adoration than He Himself, or did the ideal stem from His own nature? Is God's creation more beautiful than God Himself, or did the entire universe arise from His own overflow, existing to point to Him? Are we more worthy of God's love than He Himself, or do we too exist and sustain perpetually by His hand? In the Bible, we read that all creation, including you and me, exists to *point* to the God who created it.

I want to focus in on us humans now and ask the question: "What is best to be lifted up and displayed before our eyes?" Is it best that my self be lifted up for my enjoyment? Is it best that God say, "Look how fearful and wonderful you are!" (a sinful warping of Psalm 139)? The Psalmist actually says to God:

"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well." (Psalm 139:13-14)

There is only one object of this psalmist's gaze and wonder, and it is not himself. It is the God who formed, knitted, made, and worked. The psalmist himself is a sign pointing to the permanent One. He would not be using such high language if he were merely saying, "Wow, I'm a really complex and interesting organism. Look how wonderful I am."

Look, self-esteem is a trap laid to strangle us until we die. I know that's harsh, but don't equate self-esteem with worth. They aren't the same thing. Self-esteem is us stirring up a high view of ourselves. In self-esteem, our eyes are fixed on ourselves. But we were created to esteem Jesus, and our eyes were created to be fixed on Him. This is the true source of delight, and it is also the only real source of worth. Being created in the image of God is what gives us value because of the value of the God we image. And for those Jesus rescues, being wrapped in Jesus and adopted as a true child of God is a worth that nothing else can rival. Self-esteem deprives us of the joy of esteeming Jesus, and therefore it really does suffocate us. We were created to find true pleasure by musing on God's glory, nature, complexity, and promises.

"O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me." (Psalm 63)

What is best to be lifted up and displayed before our eyes? Is it best that my self be lifted up for my enjoyment?

This psalmist is empty, needy, and dying, as if he were in a dry and dying land with no water. We can all relate to this feeling. The sin in us longs for God to lift up to us that we are inherently lovable, worthy, good, and beautiful. Our sin wants the world to revolve around us. But our greatest need, our true joy, is to behold and dwell with God, to revolve around Him. Our hearts were made to behold someone far better than ourselves, or any other person for that matter. Only God can truly overflow our hearts. Looking at ourselves to see ourselves lifted up pales by comparison. Also, we are simply not inherently lovable, worthy, good, or beautiful – certainly not compared to God anyway. We are broken reflections of who He is. We are stained. To escape this, we would have to invent a god wholly different from the God who is. Lifted before us would be groundless self-speak and positive thinking divorced from a relationship for which we were created. Esteeming God, not ourselves, is our path to being quenched and satisfied.

The psalmist knows where quenching resides: in the sanctuary (the presence) of God. He knows where to go and where not to go. Our eyes need to see the glory of God! We need to behold a God who, *according to the riches of His grace*, loves deeply, imparts divine worth, redeems, and cleanses helpless sinners. In Ephesians 1, we receive that which alone quenches our deep thirst: a constant pointing to who God is. Ephesians points us over and over again to God's wisdom, grace, and power. It lands on *Him*.

This is why Paul says like a broken record: “according to, to the praise of, in Him, according to, in all, according to, in Him, according to, of Him, according to, so that, in Him, to the praise of, of Him, that you may know, according to.” I actually went through and repeated each phrase I saw in order to show you just how often Paul points us to God's glory in that chapter alone! This matters because Paul is giving us an example to follow. The opposite of this is when my thoughts are dominated by daily concerns, plans, anxieties, arguments, and lusts; yet nowhere does “according to God” come into the picture. When we live our daily lives too far removed from God's glory, we lose the anchor that gives our hearts rest. We live broken.

Paul opens Romans by giving us the reason God sent him out with the gospel message: God's name among all nations. His mission to love and shepherd God's people doesn't stop when he says that his mission is to spread God's name. They aren't two separate missions. They form a single mission because Paul says to the Romans: “including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.” This is our best possible context and definition as a church. And Paul gives us an example as he focuses on God's glory in all the Earth as the context of his love for God's people.

The very best way God could possibly love us is to give us Himself, to display Himself, to protect His fame and His nature to the ends of the Earth. This is why the Romans 1 suppressing of His glory is such a big deal. We need to know very clearly that His love for Himself in no way *excludes* a love for us. Entirely to the contrary, His love for Himself is the best and only way He could truly love us! His protection of His name is the best and only way He could protect us. If God Himself is the greatest treasure in existence, then our greatest good is to see and know Him. His glory is our primary grace. His spread to all

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nations through the gospel is His very best for us. In this, He knows very well that we are perfectly loved and satisfied.

For our redemption to focus on anything but God Himself would merely reinforce the creation-ward trap of our worship¹⁵ in Romans 1. Loving all but God *is* our disease. Infatuation with God above all else *is* our cure, a cure won for us by Jesus Christ, who exchanged places with us. If something glorifies God, then it inherently is good for His people. And if something is truly good for us, it must by definition glorify God. The two are inseparable. Our value and our rescue are given freely as a gift by the One we esteem: Jesus Christ.

- When you read that literally everything in your life answers to, revolves around, and relates to “God’s glory,” how does that strike you?
- What kind of person do you usually view God to be? What is He like? What is He doing? How do you relate to Him?
- How did it impact you that God loves Himself foremost? Does it click how that is also His best love for you? Does it still feel distant or detached?
- Does it connect with you how much value the gospel gives you? Does the gospel help you rest from striving for self-esteem? Where does the gospel not feel all that real to you right now?

GOD HIMSELF IS OUR REWARD (HEBREWS 12; EXODUS 19, 1 PETER 1)

What we want as our end reward and destination in redemption matters. All of us tend to go astray in subtle ways, ones we don’t immediately see. For example:

- “I’ll invest a lot of effort now so it doesn’t have to be so hard later.”
 - This reveals that I have an idol¹⁶ of future ease rather than a goal of knowing and trusting God more. Can we pray for God to relieve the circumstances? Sure, Jesus did. But He also said, in faith, “Nevertheless, Your will be done.”
 - This can also reveal that I ultimately want to be in control, and it expresses my desire to not feel needy, ultimately to not need God.
 - This also circumvents the whole point of suffering, trials, and difficulty. Lived right, the Christian life will always leave us feeling desperate and needy. This is not a bad thing because God uses this to keep our eyes off of false hopes and fixed on the only thing that satisfies: Himself.
- “I want to stop lusting so I can have a spouse and a normal life” or “I want a spouse so I’ll stop lusting”
 - Whatever you think marriage will alleviate, it will eventually make much worse. Ask anyone who’s married and honest.

The Christian life will always leave us feeling desperate and needy. God uses this to keep our eyes off of false hopes and fixed on the only thing that satisfies: Himself.

- A spouse or “normal life” may not be what God chooses to give you for your good. Marriage, in the flesh, often leaves people lonelier than singleness. God alone satisfies, and to some He gives marriage as a gift.
- “I want to conquer depression so I don’t keep hating myself.”
 - My reputation and image are given to me by Jesus, my worldly accolades died with Jesus, and I rose with Jesus with *His* identity. To have my esteem be *my* goal and not *His* esteem is showing that I don’t trust in God’s provision through Jesus. Only God can esteem us best: a freely given esteem, unearned and secured by God from loss or diminishing. He gives us the value of being His adopted children! Do we really think we can conjure a self-esteem that compares to that?

EVERY THOUGHT, WORD, AND DEED REVOLVING AROUND GOD

I have this picture in my head that has helped me dissect where my thoughts, desires, and plans really are. Think of a solar system where your thoughts, your longings, your schedule, your ambitions, and your hopes are all planets revolving around a sun. The question is: What is that sun? What is at the center of your thoughts? What pulls them one direction or another? What strikes you with anxiety? What elates you? In reality, there are many suns, but usually there are a few that stand out as the most massive, pulling with gravity that is greater than the others.

For instance, when I’m struck with anxiety, I imagine scenarios. I conjure up little movies in my head, hypothetical situations. What is common to all of them, what moves my fears is *how people view me*. My worth and my identity are tangled up in that. If someone sees me as a moron, I feel worthless. If they see me as successful, I feel elated. Obviously, my reputation is what lies at the center of my solar system in those times.

What is particularly tricky is when we set our thoughts and hearts to counter or avoid things. It’s hardly uncommon to say, “I don’t care what they think!” Yet that thought *still* appeals to what other people think about us. When an attractive body walks by, and we think, “Don’t look, don’t look, don’t look,” that approach is *still* centered on another person’s body. I can declare that I will never let someone hurt me like that again, but my hiding is still revolving around what was done to me. By avoiding intimacy and trust, my actions continue to revolve around my abuse and what I believe it says about God and about myself. When we fight sin in this way, sin still sits squarely at the center of our thoughts. An ultimate goal of “not sinning” is still revolving around sin! The more helpful and biblical approach is disregard sin entirely and shift our focus proactively toward God’s character and commands. We must view sin as a *distracting side issue* in our desperate pursuit of God.

What stands at the center of your own life? Be honest, and avoid Sunday School answers. We all have idols to kill, and God exposing these things is a grace to us. We need not be intimidated by difficult struggles. We can trust in His greater power in us because of what Jesus Christ has already done for us.

Even subtler is the view that God is essentially a therapist who is there to satisfy my desires as I define them. This is so sneaky because God actually does love to satisfy us overwhelmingly! Even when the object of our desire is not inherently bad, when we desire it more than we desire God, He is dethroned, and the desire shows itself as evil. Anything, even

our continued breathing, being more important and more desirable than God means we will accuse Him of wrong during suffering or when something is withheld from us that we wanted badly. We do not release Him to define our truest needs, and we do not trust Him to know what is best for us. Do I first require that my desire be met and then look to God, or do I first behold an open-handed God who loves to meet my needs as *He* defines them and then watch my needs be met with joy? There is a big difference. Needs must be dethroned, and God must steal away *all* of our planets.

Anything, even our continued breathing, being more important and more desirable than God Himself means we will accuse Him of wrong during suffering.

The redeemed picture is that I soak in a Father who gives only good things to me, and I long to know and trust *Him*, whatever He may give. If He withholds, while I may still ask for it, I reinterpret my lack, knowing He lovingly protects His sheep. If He gives and I feel it is too much, while I may still ask for easier circumstances, I reinterpret my stress and know that He cannot give more than He enables me to overcome by the powerful grace He works in me through Jesus. I see my past failures, but I look far more intensely at just how overwhelmingly Jesus embarrassed the power of sin, and I trust Him. I see doubt in my heart and the fruit of doubt in my life, and I run to God, crying out “I believe, help my unbelief!” I feel the powerful tug of sexual lust, yet all the more I soak in God as a protective Shepherd, embracing Groom, and lavish Father, and I cry out for help to enjoy and love Him. In withdrawal, I come close to a suffering servant, Jesus Christ, who is right here with me in the extreme difficulty, understanding it perfectly with compassion I don’t remotely deserve. In all of this, I am honest about life, and yet it revolves around God. He ultimately says to my planets, “Go here and go there.” Where are your eyes fixed? On yourself, on others, on worldly things, on ideals, or on the storms of life? Or are they fixed on God, trusting Him?

WHEN GOD IS NOT THE CENTER OF OUR ORBIT

As an example of what it looks like for sin to spring out of God not being the center of our lives, consider Adam and Eve. While there are many interpretations of this section of scripture, one truth is undeniable: they really did not trust God. Read through Genesis 1-3. Did you notice God’s promise to Adam: “Behold, I have given you...”? That alone speaks to everything Adam failed in when he sinned, and we are no different. God says, “Adam, take notice of this, and don’t forget it. I’m giving you all good things. That’s who I am. I love you, and I provide the best for you.” What happens when the serpent tempts Eve with Adam beside her? They are moved far too easily by the temptation that God did not intend their good, that He is hiding what is truly good from them. They wanted self-sufficiency, to know good and evil themselves, and to judge for themselves. They thought, agreeing with the serpent, that this knowledge was better than walking with God face to face. His provision was not enough for them. *He* was not enough for them. Do we not also tend to run to knowledge before we run to God, wanting to control and determine our paths for ourselves rather than relying on Him? Do we place trust in knowing things about God and stop short of the sanctuary where He lives? We say in our sin, “God, when I understand, then I’ll trust You, but not a moment before.”

These are deep but not complex truths. They are truths we would tell our young children, and those truths – the ones that glare broadly and obviously from all of scripture, the ones our eyes glaze past – they are the truths that do the heavy lifting for us, leading us to dwell with a faithful God in joy. Did Adam and Eve soak in God’s provision? Did they really behold it? No, or else they would run to God in horror that someone would say something so deceitful about Him. From the beginning of sinful humanity, we did not behold, we did not desire, and we did not trust God. Romans 1 is much like a retelling of this: how God is absent from our desires and how desperately we need rescue.

The same can be said of every sin and suffering today. I don’t trust God, and in my everyday life, I do not behold Him. I need alcohol or pornography because I’m alone, and life is only fodder for grumbling. I cannot trust people because when they hurt me, I am identified as: “fool”, “victim”, “shameful”, “joke”, “door mat”, “punching bag”, and “in the way.” We waste away in envy, crying to ourselves, “if only I could have a decent house,” “if only I could be like them,” “if only she would notice me.” Everywhere, we don’t trust God, we don’t perceive God, and His provision is not good for us. His identity is not best for us. This is how His glory (who He is) truly does reside at the core of everything we face. He, Himself, is what we need most. Our eyes need to be on *Him*. They need to be delighted by Him. We need *real pleasure* in God.

- Where does the idea of getting God Himself above any Earthly hope feel empty or alienating? What is that hope? In what way does God feel less than that right now?
- Where is your trust level at right now with God? What areas are raw?

THE GOSPEL: GOD’S POWER TO SAVE US (ROMANS 1)

God’s glory is at the center of our entire lives. And at the center of God’s glory, where we see His nature most clearly displayed, is the gospel: what Jesus Christ did on the cross. It is so fundamental that Paul says to the Corinthians, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Eternity past looks forward to the cross, and eternity future looks backward on the cross. There, what Christ did explodes outward with unrelenting force like a supernova, fulfilling the longings of eternity past, and lavishing overwhelming grace on eternity future to culminate finally in Jesus’s return as He brings to a sum all of creation. The implications of Jesus’s death and resurrection cannot be numbered or probed. So what did He actually *do*?

Let’s look at some highlights. I’m putting some scriptures that talk about each point to help you look for it for yourself. In particular, it would be good to read Isaiah 53 and Romans 5-8 to read through a decent portion of the gospel. Those are dense chapters that talk about what Jesus did, does, and will do for us. Even if you’ve heard this before, and even though it’s in a list, please don’t let it lose its punch! These are real things. What Jesus has done for us is important on a universal scale. It should leave us shocked at what kind of God would do all of this for His people! You cannot *really* hear this and be unmoved. It’s unsettling to say the least.

- He exchanged places with all people who hear the gospel and trust Him.
 - He took on Himself God’s punishment for all of our sin: past, present, and future. (Isaiah 53; 1 Peter 2:24; Romans 4:25)

- He traded places with us, obeying on our behalf because we neither *could* obey nor *wanted* to obey. (Romans 3:11-18,23-25; Romans 8:3)
- His obedience is credited to us as if we had obeyed just like Jesus did. God treats us as if we had lived Jesus's life. (2 Corinthians 5:21)
- In this, we are considered completely right and just. God *cannot* punish us after Jesus atones for us because Jesus already received that punishment. (Romans 8:1)
- He defeated sin and death as well as our old sinful natures.
 - We died with Jesus, and the power of sin died with Him. (Romans 6:1-12; Colossians 2:14-15)
 - So we are no longer captives of sin. We do not have to sin. (Romans 6:1-12)
- He gave us new natures and the Holy Spirit.
 - Jesus left His grave empty, and we rose with Him. We live new lives with Him, lives oriented to God, leaving behind the death we used to walk in. (Romans 6:1-12)
 - We are given new hearts and new desires, particularly we're given the Holy Spirit, who is God living in us wherever we go, guiding and empowering us to trust Him. (2 Peter 1:4; 1 Corinthians 2:10-13; John 16:7-15)
 - We are now captivated by grace, and we grow new desires for God as we behold Him, hearing the gospel with faith. (Galatians 3:1-5)
 - As God's own children, bride, and loved sheep, grace is more powerful than sin. (Romans 8:15,23; Revelation 21:9-14; 1 Peter 2:25; Romans 5:20-21)
- He guaranteed that God will be generously and abundantly give us what is good for us.
 - Having crushed His Son for us while we were at our worst, He guarantees forever that we can trust His provision to continue and be for our good. The hardest part is already finished. (Romans 8:31-39; Romans 5:6-11)
- He sealed us and hid us in Himself, guaranteeing heaven forever with Himself.
 - United with Jesus, we also ascended to heaven with Him, and we are kept safe with Jesus there. (Colossians 3:1-4)
 - This guarantees that Jesus will finish what He started. (Philippians 1:6)
 - We have confidence that redemption will never stop but will go all the way to completion. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)
 - Heaven is where the promises all really come to fulfillment. It is well worth our longings and hopes being ultimately placed there. (1 Peter 1:13)
 - The greatest joy of heaven is being fully with God face-to-face with no sin separating us from Him. We will finally enjoy Him without other desires pulling us away from Him. (Revelation 21:1-4)
- He placed us in a family.
 - He is the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. We are set into close-knit family by God with one Father. (Romans 8:29)

That's the gist of the "what," but it doesn't begin to probe the "so what." Implications of these things have no end to our everyday lives, the big and the small. We'll be finding them and enjoying this grace in new ways until the day we die, and even beyond that. If I get fired for no

apparent reason, I know God is not punishing me because there's nothing left to punish. If I am treated with disdain, punched, mocked, or cheated on, then I still have my identity secure with Jesus. No one on Earth can name me like that again, and nothing has the power to separate me from Jesus. In the middle of suffering and extreme difficulty, I am still more than a conqueror in Jesus because nothing can separate me from Him or undo what He's done for me. If my child dies, God weeps with me, and He will find a way to work that for not only my good but for everyone He calls. Their life was *not* wasted or unnoticed by any means. In my immense physical pain, I have a hope: a guaranteed inheritance that I did not earn, where there will be no suffering and no sinful desire.

The gospel informs everything: If I'm cut off in traffic, I can absorb the offense as Jesus absorbed mine because I think His thoughts, desire His desires, and love His loves. I feel so lonely and am aching to fill the silence with TV, but I know that God really is with me right now, and I can be with Him. I can rest in Him right now and not be anxious and afraid. In withdrawal, I fix my eyes on the God who gives grace that is powerful enough for any difficulty right this very moment, on the God who dwells with me each moment.

HOW THE GOSPEL WORKS

There are two things that happen when a person is saved. (1) God is *displayed* to us in the gospel, what Christ does for sinners. (2) We see Him and *trust* Him. The first part is something in which we, as believers, actively participate. We display God by talking about Him and showing Him off in our actions. The second part (faith) is all God's work, and this is where we see the switch in 1 Corinthians 1 happen. The gospel turns from foolishness and offense into overwhelming wisdom and power. The gospel we heard maybe a thousand times, considering it to be cheesy and moronic, suddenly starts to strike us. We feel, we long, we break, we move, and we trust God. This is *His* doing, a gift that is undeserved and invasive.

That being said, our growth in becoming more like Jesus is accomplished in exactly the same way. We behold God again, maybe in a new area we hadn't seen before. We trust Him, and that trust is powerful as it works out in tangible obedience. Galatians 3 calls this "hearing with faith." This is what propels us, grows us, rescues us, and kills sinful desires.

Further, the gospel works by *overwhelming*. When we are cornered by sorrow in suffering, the joy and hope of our inheritance to come is so magnificent that Paul (who suffered more than most) calls our sufferings "unworthy to be compared".¹⁷ Peter says we should spring up with joy inexpressible and full of glory in our suffering!¹⁸ In Romans we read that where sin abounds, grace abounds *more*¹⁹. Colossians shows how Christ disarmed our prior captor, sin, and defeated it so badly that it was openly mocked. Christ humiliated sin²⁰. So this all frees us to stay away from shallow fronts. We can be honest about how much the abuse hurt, how luring the sin really is, why suffering hurts, how we feel, and what we believe in our flesh.

The severity of sin and suffering only serves to further lift God up in how much He overwhelms it. I am allowed to have sorrow, fear, and despair. Where suffering grieves us, God's present grace, grieving with us, forgiveness, joy over us, presence, and especially promised inheritance (heaven) overwhelm our grief. We tell our souls, "Remember the Lord!" Where sins beset us and cause us to feel despair, God's promises, power over sin, guarantee of sanctification, and guarantee of heaven to come all act to overwhelm that despair. It then gives

way to joyful hope and confidence. Where lusts and envies of various kinds pull and tug, we look to our open-handed Father, our protective Shepherd, our Dad with joy over His sons and daughters, our Groom who sings over His bride. He draws us to desire Him deeply, and only then are we able to shrug off lust as if it were nothing to us.

THE CENTRALITY OF TRUST

A word we see probably more than any other when it comes to striving is “faith,” and it’s safe to say that the focus on faith in striving cannot be overstated. Faith goes beyond believing in God’s existence or a few of His attributes or even agreeing with the biblical picture of Him. Biblical faith is closer to what most of us probably think of when we say: “trust.” A child trusts his or her parents with almost full abandon (aside from abusive situations), and we are given this as a picture of faith. Trust implies reliance and rest in leaving something to the hands of another. Trust implies the faithfulness, competence, and ability of the one trusted. We are commanded to trust God, and we are not left to ourselves in this. He is displayed in the gospel: who He is, what He’s done, what He promises, how He’s been faithful. Then the Holy Spirit brings us to life to see the gospel with new eyes. We are commanded to behold, to meditate, to pore over, to long for, to obey, and to enjoy. This is what fuels our trust.

This trust is the difference between “legalism”²¹ and real obedience. In both cases, we work our tails off, but we work for vastly different reasons. In legalism, we work in order to earn something or keep from losing something. In true obedience, we work because we trust the God who gives promises, commands, and warnings. Legalism says, “I need to read my Bible this morning so my day will go better. God will be mad at me if I don’t read the Word today.” Obedience *of faith* says: “God freely reveals Himself, loves me, has commanded me to read, and warns me of callousness. So I trust Him and long to read the Word.” Over time, obedience of faith often does not actually consider what we get or lose as we live in Jesus’s abundance. It just looks at God and says, “I know You. I trust You. Thank You!”

Over time, obedience of faith often does not actually consider what we get or lose as we live in Jesus’s abundance.

At all times, be considering your heart’s trust. Don’t just assess it, but build it. *Can God be trusted?* This is the most fundamental question we can ask. We find the answer as we behold God as He really is.

THE GOAL OF THIS SEASON

The goal is simple: *that you would know and trust God*. If really tough circumstances remain, God is using that to show you how powerful He is and to shake idols loose from your hopes. If a stubborn temptation remains, He is showing you that you perpetually live “in Him” and that apart from the Vine, you suffocate. If it takes struggling with depression, He is drawing you out of your isolated, self-oriented thoughts and keeping you from both pride succeeding (boasting in yourself) and from pride failing (shame).

Whatever He ordains (insomnia, assault, depression, anger, sexual lust, envy, insult, isolation, substance withdrawal), His stance for you, believer, is “I love you and will never leave you. Endure because you have *Me*.” Whatever it takes, the goal is that you would reinterpret your needs, your sufferings, your sins, your past, your present, and your future by seeing and trusting how He cares for you. We live our lives out of what we think our experiences say about God. Yet, it is God who truly interprets our experiences. He does not revolve around our stories. Our stories revolve around Him.

APPLICATION

This will be the application for the rest of the season as we dive into more specifics: **God really is that worthy of our trust.** This takes root as we constantly think, long for, and enjoy God as He really is. What most of us don’t realize starting out is how we are to live life in the everyday: during the commute, after a fight with a spouse, as we rise in the morning, when a torrent of anxieties strike us at night, when we succeed at work, and when our kids disobey. Our thoughts in every mundane time must be probing God’s glory and savoring Him. This discipline, the everyday discipline, is where the *real* work of redemption is done. This is where gospel promises become powerful.

Are you feeling vulnerable in salvation, like you might not make it to the end? Lift your eyes this very moment to the One who promises to sustain you. Are you struggling in lust, feeling stuck in sinful desires? Lift your eyes this very moment to the One who created all things, who alone is worthy of our longings and alone will satisfy what we most deeply need. Are you feeling cold and alone, wondering when things might change? Lift your eyes this very moment to the One who is with us through feast and famine, guiding us to the home He created for us. Are you feeling disqualified, unworthy, and dirty? Lift your eyes this very moment to the One who died and put that person to death with Himself on the cross. Are you proud and unresponsive? Lift your eyes this very moment to the One who cannot be trifled with, who is jealous for our worship, and who disciplines His children. Are you weary in striving and feeling weak? Lift your eyes this very moment to the One who never changes, and be awed at the reality that soon, you will be with Him fully and forever in a home so glorious that it causes us to leap for joy even in desperate persecution. From start to enduring to finish, when things are easy and coasting or when things are overwhelming and we don’t know which way is up, we cry out, “O my soul, arise! Behold the risen Christ!”²²

- Where is your “beholding” right now? What’s an example in your life when you enjoy God? What’s an example when you typically do not?
- Where in your everyday life do you tend to go about your business without God in your thoughts, daydreams, longings, and plans?
- How does the moment-by-moment, daily nature of redemption strike you?

ACTION

Each day this week, set aside a time to go through one of the points of the gospel on page 18, and think through, “*What kind of person would do this?*” to confront your old views of who God is. Let this be an invitation to enjoy Him for a while and dwell with the God who goes to such lengths to reconcile us when we least deserve it. It’s important to get out of your own head in these times, and I’ve found two practical things to help in this regard. First, you need input that isn’t generated in your own thoughts: reading or hearing scripture. Second, you need output that isn’t confined to your own thoughts: speaking aloud or writing. These help anchor those racing thoughts, and they help prayer (encountering a real God) to emerge from mere inward thoughts that are vaguely about God. It’s really important to do this *each day* – not out of obligation but because of the joy and depth of knowing God that comes with consistently dwelling with Him. *Consistency* in our dwelling with God is a command through which God does very powerful things in us. The goal of this proactive discipline is to begin reshaping your view of God *throughout the day*, where it matters most.

¹ Genesis 1

² Genesis 21

³ Exodus 7-12

⁴ John 20; Acts 1

⁵ 2 Peter 1

⁶ Romans 3; Romans 7; Romans 6:21

⁷ Exodus 9:4; Exodus 11:7

⁸ Exodus 14-17

⁹ Romans 4:25

¹⁰ “Beholding” will be a big word we rely on often in this curriculum. It involves thinking deeply on who God is, tasting and enjoying Him, dwelling with Him, and desiring Him. It’s like how we fantasize about worldly things (fame, sex, money, ease, retirement, etc.). We picture it, we long for it, and we drool over it. Beholding God is picturing, longing, and drooling over who He is.

¹¹ Everyone is skeptical about this at first. I know I was. So it’s good to see it with your own eyes and not just take my word on it. I’m using ESV (English Standard Version) phrasing here simply because it’s what I’m familiar with. Search for the phrases “that you may know”, “my glory”, “name’s sake”, and “make known” in your favorite bible search program (try <http://www.biblegateway.com>). Read Ephesians 1 and ask, “Why does God do what He does?” Consider the main topic of 1 Corinthians 1-2. This gives a beginning taste of how God loves and displays Himself foremost and how this is such a huge grace to us.

¹² Romans 1

¹³ Translation of an excerpt from “Confessions” by St. Augustine of Hippo.

¹⁴ When Jesus “atones” for us, it literally means that He “covers” us. Jesus covers the filth of our sin with His pure and perfect obedience. When I mention atonement, think, “I’m covered by Jesus. God now views and treats me as if I had lived Jesus’s life, as if I were His perfectly obedient Son since eternity past.”

¹⁵ The words translated as “worship” in the Bible give pictures of bowing down, falling flat, kissing a hand, revering, honoring, serving, and seeking help. We are always worshipping *something*, whether God, people, or things. Let this be what you think of when you read the word “worship.”

¹⁶ We’ll get there more in Chapter 5, but an “idol” is something that pretends to be god but isn’t God. Idols make promises that sound like God’s, but they don’t follow through. Idols steal our eyes and hearts away from God.

¹⁷ Romans 8:18

¹⁸ 1 Peter 1:8-9

¹⁹ Romans 5:20

²⁰ Colossians 2:15

²¹ “Legalism” is a word Christians often use to mean “I’ll do something in order to make God give me something I want.” It’s the opposite of “obedience of faith,” which means, “I’ll do something because I *trust* the God who has *already given* me everything I could ever want or need.”

²² From the chorus of “O My Soul Arise” by Sovereign Grace Music, a song adapted from Charles Wesley’s hymn from 1742 with lyrics and music added by Eric McAllister.

CHAPTER 2: LABORING IN GOD'S WORD

Just now I enjoyed one of the most profound times I've ever had. I simply read Romans 12-16. I yearned, I mourned, I repented, I enjoyed, and I rested. I realized that I'm really bad about being wise in my own opinion. I begged the Holy Spirit to make me truly see myself and my deep need for His wisdom. I read Romans 15:13 and melted with hope, peace, and joy as if that blessing were prayed for the first time just now. I read Romans 15:21 and stood in awe of a God so powerful that He makes His gospel clear to those who have no context for it at all. This means He can reach someone like me, and it causes me to long for others to see His gospel too.

In the span of just thirty minutes, I was changed from a lonely, godless entertainment addict to a worshipper who genuinely enjoys God above all things. I moved from flesh to Spirit, and everything changed. My deepest desires gave way, and rest subdued my turbulent heart. This is the power of God's Word to all who have the Holy Spirit.

The Word corrects me far more often than other people ever could. It touches me far more deeply than any sermon ever could. It reveals things I could never just think my way through. It answers questions I could never think to ask, and it shows my former questions to be childish by comparison.

I wilt away without these times, and so do you.

WHAT KEEPS US AWAY?

If I can't dig out every last ounce of meaning from a passage in the Bible, then I shouldn't even bother. If I interpret something wrongly, then God will look down on me. In fact, God is probably looming over me right now just waiting for me to mess His Word up somewhere. The idea of reading the Bible intimidates me. It's so complicated that I'm not able to understand it. Why is it that 10 people read a passage and pretend it means 10 different things? How can I possibly hope to get it right, then? I don't have time to read the Word. My life is already taken up with my work, spouse, kids, and church. Even when I do read the Word, it seems bland, and my day is just as hard to live through as it would be otherwise. Everyone seems to act like reading the Word always makes them feel bright and happy. But when I read the word, it's usually challenging. It didn't fix the problem I wanted it to fix. So why bother reading it?

Our aversion to the Bible is based on lies about who God is.

I bet you relate to at least something in that paragraph. It may not be what we're supposed to think, but we *do* think it. There's something ironic about that first paragraph. Our aversion to the Bible is actually based on lies about who God is. Yet, the Word we avoid is our only hope for rescue from those same lies. It's a dangerous cycle.

I want to begin by looking at just a few of those lies. I want to show you the real God you're encountering in the Word. This also starts a powerful cycle. The Word shows you a God you simply didn't expect. That God gives you a hunger to know Him more. In that hunger, you work hard in the Word to further enjoy His nature and promises.

IF I CAN'T DO IT "RIGHT," THEN I SHOULDN'T DO IT AT ALL

Some of us are bent from birth to stake our reputation on everything we get our hands on. We call it "perfectionism." I'm, unfortunately, a card-carrying member of this camp. So I can say firsthand that this is neither innocent nor noble. This mindset is centered on self. I set the bar for what's good enough. I judge my own worth based on what I do. I cause things to happen with my own effort. So how does this represent a false God? Well, He's usually *absent altogether*, as if He didn't actually exist. My eyes are in the wrong place entirely. My eyes need to disregard myself for a while, and they need to remember God.

The truth is that God establishes what is "good enough" and what is not. We can't even come close to being good enough to belong with Him, no matter how precise a perfectionist we think we are. That's exactly why Jesus was punished in our place. Not only that, but we swapped places. Contrary to what we deserve, we're actually treated by God as if we had lived Jesus's life, as if we were *that* perfect. God judges us based on what Jesus does. God causes us to see Him by *His* own effort. The truth is that everything really does revolve around God. This helps us abandon perfectionism and rest in the reality that salvation, including our time in the Word, is all His work. We rely on Him, our eyes must be on Him, and we can trust Him.

GOD'S JUST WAITING FOR ME TO MISINTERPRET SOMETHING

God might actually be present in this mindset, but it's not the true God. This idea of a looming, distant God whose arms are folded and eyes are narrowed, just waiting for us to make a mistake, is not the God you'll find in the Bible. For sure, God hates it when His image is twisted and defamed more intensely than you know. Yet, all of that hatred landed squarely on Jesus for all who trust in Him. Jesus absorbed entirely, once and for all, every last drop of wrath for every last person He saves. The real God isn't distant from His people, but He's incredibly near. He isn't looming, but He is enabling and working powerfully. His arms aren't folded, but they're open and dumping out embarrassing amounts of grace. He isn't waiting for you to make a mistake, but He's preparing good works for you to walk in – things He's planned out since before He made the first thing in creation. Is this really a God you want to avoid? I think He's a God worth getting near to. Yes, you might misinterpret something, and you also have an advocate with the Father. Be moldable, actively seek correction, and rest in Jesus's atonement.

Yes, you might misinterpret something, and you also have an advocate with the Father. Be moldable, actively seek correction, and rest in Jesus's atonement.

THE BIBLE IS JUST TOO COMPLICATED, AND I CANNOT UNDERSTAND IT

Well, truth be told, if it were just you working your tail off with nothing else, this statement would be entirely true. The Word really *is* too much for you. But you are certainly not alone in this. Even more than that, it's ultimately by His effort alone that God illuminates Himself to you. No matter how hard you work, if the Holy Spirit were not graciously showing God off to you, then you would consider everything in the Bible to be either offensive or

foolish. The truth is that God “makes wise the simple.” Are you simple? Good! That makes you perfect for His grace.

Read Psalm 19. Notice how hearing and reading realities about God makes us wise and enlightens us. Now read Ephesians 1, and notice how Paul speaks about God enlightening us. God is in the business of unveiling and revealing Himself to His people. He’s powerful enough to do it, and He *delights* in doing it. You’re relying on God to reveal Himself powerfully to you as you labor in the Word. To place yourself beyond His power to reveal Himself to you is actually *accusing* Him of being powerless. Knowing God’s power to reveal Himself is good motivation to work hard in the Word. This is because our labor is guaranteed to accomplish something profound. You know this because *God* is the one accomplishing it!

IF EVERYBODY SEEMS TO MISINTERPRET SCRIPTURE, WHAT HOPE DO I HAVE?

Most people who misinterpret scripture aren’t actually reading it to find out what it says. I know that sounds cavalier, but it’s the truth. So often, we approach the Word trying to prove our preconceived notions. We approach the Word to answer the questions *we* want answered, not caring what it actually says. We approach the Word proudly, like we’re above it and can judge it. But approaching the Word as a humble student and needy beggar will cure most of our problems of misinterpretation. I really mean that. Ditch your preconceived notions, and table your burning questions for a while. Ask God, “What are you actually saying here?” Beg Him for help. He is more than able to make Himself clear in His Word. As we labor, our dependence is on God, not on ourselves. Finally, you should actively seek correction in community. This is a great safety net if you do interpret something wrongly. It’s better to need correction than to avoid laboring altogether.

I DON’T HAVE TIME

Can I just be honest and say that 99.9% of us who say this actually do have plenty of time? And, yes, I know that 78.6% of statistics are made up on the spot. In reality, I think we simply crave other things more than we crave the Word, and we use busyness as an excuse. It’s hardly ever a problem with time. It’s a problem with priorities and desires. So, what is it that is consuming your priorities and desires? I’ll go further and say that probably 90% of the time, the dominant problem is our insatiable craving for cheap entertainment. Allow me to indict myself first here. I struggle with this. If you took out all TV, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and for-pleasure reading, I bet your schedule would open up. I’m not pretending that entertainment is always bad, but when it shows up as a higher priority than the Word, it needs pruning. For the other 10% of us, are you a workaholic? Do you trust God with your finances? Are you identifying yourself by a career? What are those rogue priorities, and what do they say about your view of God?

Remember that this is about our view of *God*. Entertainment and escape can arise from any number of lies about God. Do you see God as unpleasurable? Does He feel cold and distant, leaving you lonely? Does He bore you? Does He seem less important than your work deadlines? I encourage you to remember how Jesus views the Father: as *food*! Food is quenching and enjoyable. Remember Isaiah 55 for a while, and come back to the true God who satisfies. Remember Psalm 46 in hearing about the God who never leaves and always rescues. Read

Hebrews 3, and remember a God who cannot be trifled with or taken only at your leisure. You really do have time. You've been duped by lies about God, and your priorities are the casualty of this. Remember the real God, repent, and trust Him again.

THE WORD ISN'T FIXING WHAT I WANTED IT TO

We've all heard people talk about reading the Word as if happy rays of sunshine were zapping down at a meadow with glittery butterflies swarming all around. And then we *actually* read the Word. Look, the Word is *challenging*. You don't read the Psalms and think, "wow, things are so much easier now." You read them, and you join the Psalmist with real heart-wrenching cries for rescue, with face-planting admission of sin, with depths of joy in the pleasures of God, and with longing for heaven to right the wrongs around us with justice and redemption. There's nothing emotionally light about the Word. It is deep, it is rich, and it is worth the effort. What the Word does is confront us with a God who is incredibly glorious. The Word is meant to tell us about *God*. Knowing God will speak to your issues, I promise. The goal is to know Him well, and the Word often reveals things about Him we never knew we needed. If we come to the Word only to fix a few problems, then we will gloss over things, make things about ourselves, and probably misinterpret things too. But if we come with the goal of *seeing God more clearly*, it will do exactly that, and we walk away both satisfied and changed.

WILL YOU LABOR?

So will you labor in the Word? Think about this God, who is able to make Himself known, who is at the center of everything, who has covered His people's sins in Jesus, and who works powerfully for our good to satisfy us deeply. Is this God enough motivation to spur you to the labor in the Word to get to know Him better?

GOD'S VERY WORDS

From Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology, I'd like to steal the phrase, which he may have borrowed himself: that scripture consists of "God's very words." The words themselves¹ are God-breathed through the pens and personalities of the human authors of scripture. In this, scripture has a power, a brilliance, and an overflowing with God's glory that cannot ever be replicated. No book, no sermon, no teaching, and no small group discussion will ever be the very words of God. There is something about the Spirit guiding us in a first-hand experience of God revealing Himself from scripture that will not happen in any other area of your life.

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*It is dangerous to rely
on teachings about
the Word more than
the Word itself.*

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Inherently, every second-hand account (including what you're reading now) is in some way a twisted, blurred, and off-center account of the Word. It is all skewed somehow, off-focus somewhere, misrepresenting in some way whether seemingly minute or glaring. We seek gospel-centeredness, but ultimately the Word alone is *truly* centered. It is dangerous to rely on teachings about the Word more than the Word itself.

If everything we know about God comes from a handful of teachers, as it easily can, then we all develop the same blind spots as those teachers. And trust me, your favorite teachers have blind spots just like you and I do. So if we all share the same blind spots because we only read a handful of teachers and neglect the Bible, then who will cover *our* blind spots? This will not only make our church sick, but we are entirely unaware that we're sick. What we need is *every* believer enjoying the Word most. Then, we each have unique blind spots and unique emphases on God's glory as the Spirit leads us. If you don't share my blind spot, then you can point out my blind spot and correct me. I get to see God more clearly, and we get to pursue God's mission better together.

- What about God's character most speaks to your hesitance to labor in the Word or the barriers that keep you from freely approaching the Word?
- If you were to interpret something wrongly, describe what you would struggle with the most as a result? What about God speaks to this?
- Describe a time someone helped you discover a warped view of God from scripture. What was difficult about it in the moment? How did things change for the better?

ENCOURAGEMENT FROM PSALM 1

*Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law² of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates³ day and night.
He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous⁴;
for the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Psalm 1)*

Ultimately, the only truly "blessed man" is Jesus Christ. But that this does not exclude us from being blessed also because we are united with Jesus. What He earned, we are given as if we had earned it. With Christ, we can avoid following wicked counsel, wading in sinful paths, and resting in proud scoffing. With Christ, we can do the opposite of this and *delight* in God's law, always meditating on His ways. Notice the fruit of this musing on God's law: we are rooted like a tree, we are constantly fed by running water, we reliably yield fruit, and we are evergreens that do not wither. Our endeavors prosper. Best of all, the Lord "knows our way."

From the same phrase used in Job 23, we better see what this means. Even when we do not see God clearly at work, He is working my path to His ultimate end, and it is a good end. We can trust Him, know this end, and delight in Him when we suffer.

Far worse, consider what our natural state is outside of Christ, as we lived in our wicked hearts. We loved and followed wicked counsel, having our ears tickled and ourselves exalted. We waded in sinful paths, lazy and complacent in sinful distraction. We planted ourselves in a position of proud mocking and judgment, lifting ourselves up and boasting. We found God's Word to be repulsive, and it never even entered our minds really. We were not rooted but floated along, pushed to and fro by the wind like chaff. There's no tree, no fruit, no prospering. We are a vapor vanishing away with no lasting purpose. In this state, we never belong to God, and we will never dwell with Him as the righteous do. So thank God for Jesus, who put to death our wickedness and took the punishment we deserved so that we could enjoy being blessed with Him!

I'd also like to respond in prayer. *Holy Spirit, please help me see where I'm not believing this Psalm in my own life. It's so easy to delight in my reputation, in the pleasure of TV, and in the joy of success at work. Pride comes so naturally, and mocking comes right along with it. God, thank you for Jesus, my only hope to actually delight in you. Heal me of pride and mocking by giving me the delight that Jesus has. Make the gospel real to me.*

SOME HELPS IN READING SCRIPTURE

The words above are my plea to you to be in the Word, and they are also a small example to you of how to read and apply the Word. Take a look at some of the things mentioned in the previous paragraphs.

WHAT DOES IT ACTUALLY SAY?

It might sound silly, but it's so valuable to stop often and ask the obvious questions: "What does this *actually* say? And if that's true, what does that mean? What does that change?" We live in an eyes-glazed-over culture where we all feel like we've read something a thousand times before. We pretend we already know what scripture is saying, we pretend we know the God it speaks about, and we pretend we know ourselves. But scripture is confrontational, vivid, and feisty. We must ask, "What is this actually saying in plain, simple terms? What question is this answering? What direction is this going?" Breaking scripture down with these "plain" questions is a powerful way to pull out incredibly deep realities about God. You'll find that a little scripture packs a much bigger punch than you ever thought. Find out when the passage repeats something, what's important to the author, what the author gets riled up about, and what the big direction is in the book / letter overall. Don't be afraid to look something up or ask a friend if you don't know what it means. Also, going through a little bit of scripture slowly and deeply, really probing what it means, is more impactful than skimming over a ton of text.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Sometimes we read the Word, but it just feels detached, vague, and repetitive. Our eyes glaze over, and we wonder what we're supposed to be getting out of it. Many times, this is because of a disconnect between how we talk to each other and how people talked to each other during the times the Bible was written. A good remedy is to remember that the Bible contains real communications through real people to real people for real purposes. So I encourage you to rephrase things in your own words. The content cannot change, but when you express it in the way you really speak, it's being expressed as it was meant to be. Those who wrote the Bible wrote in the ways people spoke in their own time.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. (2 Peter 1:3-4)

Let's be honest. If a friend came up to you and said those exact words, you'd be confused and probably a little put off. It's a great translation, and it's very faithful to the original letter. It's also *not* how we speak today. Personally, I might express it back to God in prayer like this:

God, in your incredible power, your Holy Spirit, living in me right now, is pouring out your character to me so that I can have a heart just like yours. Your power really does allow me to want what you want, hate what you hate, and love what you love. It's the power of the God who made and sustains the entire universe that is working in me, so I can trust that you're able to do it. That gives me every last thing I could possibly need to live an obedient life right this moment. Your power enables me to speak more gently to my wife. I can do this because you, yourself, are patient and prefer gentleness with me. All of this happens through me knowing who you really are and what you're really like. You have snatched me out of my darkness and brought me to yourself. You are so good to me, and you are so powerful!

For me, this is very specific, applied, and helpful for my own heart. I understand it might not be the language you speak most naturally, but my desire is to show you an example of what it looks like to re-word the truths of scripture into the way you, yourself, speak, and to carry that to God in prayer and thanksgiving. I didn't make anything up in that prayer either. I merely re-expressed what Peter said to a group of people, and I also used what I know from other scripture. Then I applied it to what's going on in my everyday life right this moment. I encountered God in His word, and I changed.

GENRES

Not all scripture is written the same, and so it shouldn't all be read the same. Some scripture, like Genesis through Deuteronomy, is written like a story. It's your typical narrative that repeats things, develops themes, uses imagery to make a point, foreshadows, and focuses on things for a reason.

Some scripture, like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, is "wisdom literature" that gives general truths to get across a greater theme. It's often expressed in a kind of verse form with a lot of

repetition and contrast. Things in wisdom literature are not literally true in every context, but they are generally true.

The Psalms are music from the heart, and they express deep emotion. Psalms never merely express facts. They urge the reader to *join in*. They plead with God to act, and they plead with others to see God.

Prophecy books not only express things that are yet to come, but they give commentary to Israel about *why* things are happening. They plead with people to repent, they warn of wrath, and they explain to God's people where God's hand is at work and why He's doing what He's doing. Often, prophecy speaks of things yet to come by using present and past tense as if they had already happened.

The gospels are historical accounts, and the authors focus on things for a reason. Each has a unique point to offer about Jesus and a unique style of getting that point across.

Finally, the epistles, the letters to the churches, are just that. They are *letters* from a real person written to real people for real purposes.

Most Bibles today have a few paragraphs before each book in the Bible that will help you know what genre of literature you're reading. These are useful tools in helping you read things the way the authors of scripture intended them to be read.

WHAT DOES IT SAY ABOUT GOD?

All of the Word is about *God* first and foremost, and only after that is it about us. What we learn about God from the Word is more important than anything. It is His nature, His actions, His promises, and His intentions that we most long to know. This is the absolute first thing we want to pull out of His Word. As you read scripture, constantly be asking, "What does this say about God? How have I wrongly viewed God? Is He more just than I imagined, more compassionate than I imagined, more confrontational, more weighty, more patient, slower to anger, more emotional, more invested, etc.? What has He promised? How did He act?"

HOW DOES IT LIFT OUR EYES TO CHRIST?

All of scripture points to Christ in some way. Whenever scripture speaks of someone obeying, this is pointing to Christ, who ultimately is the only one who *fully* obeyed. When scripture casts a character in a good light, it points to Christ, who is brighter amid more pressing circumstances. In Psalm 1, Christ countered wicked counsel with a call to see and obey the Father. He did not wade around in wicked paths but ran on a counter-context Godward path. He did not sit in a throne of pride and mocking but lived without a place to rest His head, ever deferring to the Father's glory. Christ is the blessed man. God knew the paths of Job who suffered and obeyed. But so much more than that, God knew the paths of Christ to whom Job merely pointed, who suffered far more and obeyed far better. Jesus delighted more than anyone in God's law and meditated it on it unceasingly. We gush over Jesus as we find scripture pointing to Him. Gushing over Jesus is *how* we change!

When scripture casts a character in a good light, our first call is to see how Christ obeyed better in a more pressing circumstance.

HOW CAN I ENJOY THE BLESSINGS CHRIST EARNED?

We are united with Christ. We can fully savor the joys of the blessed when we see them in scripture. In Christ, we confidently claim the power to obey as others in scripture have obeyed. We should not be shy in saying with the Psalmist, “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” Is this really true of us in and of ourselves? Of course it’s not. But we must also realize that we *are* Christ in us. We really are new creatures, joined with Jesus, and given the Holy Spirit. We have all we need to truly delight in God’s will here and now. We should boldly rejoice with thankfulness in how God empowers us to enjoy these things with Christ. We suffer with Christ, and we glorify the Father with joy during suffering with Christ.

WHAT DOES IT SAY ABOUT ME IN THE FLESH?

Outside of Christ’s rescue, we are always the wicked person painted by scripture. Scripture often paints contrasts of wicked versus righteous with fairly clear separation. Christ is always the righteous one, and we (outside of Christ) are always the wicked ones. We must know the nature of our flesh and our sinful default. We must let scripture paint us accurately. *I* am the one who tends to be like chaff blown away. *I* am the one who needs desperate rescue. Also, we must first apply this to ourselves and not to others. It is not my spouse, my roommate, my co-worker, or my children who need to read this passage and be confronted by it. It is *I* who need confrontation and changing grace first. We must allow scripture to paint *us* accurately, to warn *us* first, and to expose *us* first. Only then will the gospel make sense to us.

It is not my spouse, my roommate, my co-worker, or my children who need to read this passage and be confronted by it. It is I who need confrontation and changing grace first.

HOW DOES THE GOSPEL SHAPE THIS PASSAGE?

God’s clearest expression of His glory is Jesus atoning for the sins of His people, taking on Himself what we have earned and giving us what He has earned. We need to be ready to interpret scripture in light of the atonement so that we have courage to let scripture expose our flesh and our intentions. We need to be quick repenters because we know that Christ’s identity for us is safe. We need to be secure in His work on our behalf and to trust Him to bring us full to the end. The gospel alone will give us power to interpret scripture as it stands and not bend it to view us in a better light. We are our own worst enemy, that is, our sinful natures. Our own desires that we generate and grow are what allow us to be tempted in the first place. We must let scripture describe us fully.

Also, we must trust in the sure grace of Christ and confidently fix our eyes on who He is when scripture is difficult. When you read about wrath, thank God for Jesus, who took every drop of it for you. When you read about warnings, thank God for Jesus, who empowers you to heed them. When you read commands, thank God for Jesus, who gives you a delight in obeying. As you read scripture, ask: “Where is Jesus’s atoning act in the passage? How does Jesus’s cross shape the passage? How can this passage lead me to enjoy Jesus’s cross right this moment?”

WHAT IS THE MOST CLEAR?

Always look to the broadest themes you see in scripture first. Details are wonderful to help vividness and depth, and they live in harmony with the broad themes of scripture. We all have a tendency to puff ourselves up in pride over details rather than thanking God for them. Often, we'll quibble over minutia while neglecting to expose and confront our glaring areas of sin where we are not living out obvious truths of scripture. We debate over the "isms" of Christianity while ignoring the anger, lust, greed, fear, and selfishness that rot our hearts from the inside out. We even use debates to *hide* those things and keep people from probing.

Cling to what's obvious, and use those things to interpret what is less obvious. If you're confused by a passage, know that it cannot contradict what is clear. It lives in harmony with what is clear. The broadest themes, which we tell our young children, are what do the heaviest lifting in our lives: God is trustworthy, God is faithful, God is powerful, God is patient, God is just, God exchanged places with all who trust Him, God calls you to trust Him, and God is near.

HOW DOES THIS MAKE GOD MORE VIVID?

Don't avoid the complexities, detail, and difficulty of scripture. Seeing God *vividly* is our best help in redemption. We go for the broadest themes first, but these themes are colored in by the details. Scripture meets *real life* in the details. Details reveal to us when we understand the broad things wrongly. Encountering God in the Word involves real effort, and we can't shy away from that effort. Don't be afraid of learning to use a Bible dictionary, cross-references, and a concordance. Many of us are afraid of complexity, confusion, and getting our hands dirty. But God doesn't waste His breath. The details are there because you and I *need* them.

Think about any subject you've ever studied. It was frustrating at first. But you eventually became fluent by tons of repetition and asking for help. And you did this for a worldly goal. Given the power of God's Word and His Spirit, doesn't He warrant the same effort and more? Our avoidance of complexity, when it comes to God's Word, is more an issue of desire than ability. I know this because we also have the God of the universe working on our behalf to accomplish our fluency in the Word. Because God is worth it, I encourage you to dig in with everything you have, to get confused, to make mistakes, and to get skilled at discovering God more deeply in the Word.

WHAT'S THE "THEREFORE" THERE FOR?

Pay close attention to words that give us "reasons," words like: therefore, because, according to, for, so that, etc. The reasons matter a lot in scripture. Our motives and our end goals should be the same as God's and the apostles'. You'll find that things like God's glory being seen clearly in all the Earth, us fixing our eyes on Him, and appeals to *His* power, *His* mercy, and *His* wisdom, will jump from the pages as if you had never read them before. This is a great thing, and praise God! When you read a command, look around it and see what is said about God. You'll be surprised to see how much fuel we are given in scripture to trust the God who gave the command. Our primary mandate is to trust God (faith), and in that we have power *and* desire to obey.

IS IT AFFECTING MY THOUGHTS AND DESIRES?

We should be constantly chewing on who God is. Interact with God as you read: “God, thank you,” “God, have mercy,” “God, you are so patient,” “God, I would have been angry so much more quickly,” “God, please be near,” “God, this situation is so tough,” and so on. Constantly think on scripture throughout the night, in the morning, during the day, during the commute, and as your kids nap. Dwell *with* Him as you meditate on Him through scripture. Recall real, concrete things, actions, and promises. Fantasize⁵ on situations in your life where He is lifted up and enjoyed. Fantasize about heaven to come. Scripture must be changing your moment-to-moment thoughts and imaginations throughout the day, or it isn’t changing *you*. As you read scripture, make a plan for how your thoughts and daydreams will change as a result. Plan to chew on the scripture you read, and chew on it throughout the day. Discuss it with your family and friends.

DO I TRUST GOD WHEN I DON’T UNDERSTAND?

Get comfortable with mystery. Nothing in the Bible contradicts, but there are things that are beyond our grasp. How is God only one God and yet three distinct people: Father, Son, Holy Spirit? How was Jesus Christ both man and God at the same time? Exactly *how* did Jesus take such eternal punishment in three days? If salvation is God’s solo act, then why didn’t He save everybody? If salvation is God’s solo act, then why is sanctification gradual? If God is in complete control of the universe, then why am I held responsible for sin? These, and many other questions will pop into your head as you read scripture. Some of them are actually asked in scripture. There are some answers in scripture to some of these questions. But there isn’t a *complete* answer to any of the questions I just asked. What God reveals is for our good. What God withholds is also for our good. Here is a rule of thumb that will keep you safe: Don’t ignore clear scripture. It’s OK when it is hard to understand how two clear scriptures can be true at the same time. Get comfortable with mystery, and let your trust in God fuel that. When you cannot understand *how* God works, rest in trusting the *God* who works. He’s capable of doing things without needing our comprehension or approval. We can leave rescue to His capable hands.

GETTING HEADY WITH IT

While reading scripture, many of us get into what I would call “heady mode.” We turn into judges and analysts of God’s Word, and we cease to be humble students and needy beggars. We take it upon ourselves to declare what we should focus on instead of taking our cues from scripture. We rip passages out of the rivers they flow within. We refuse to let authors make their points. If it’s frustrating to find an answer to your question in scripture, it might be because that answer is not a focal point of scripture. In that case, it’s not worthy of taking up *too* much of your attention. Focus where scripture focuses.

Take a look at the beginning of Romans 6. Paul brushes right past the question, and he goes right back to the gospel of our union with Jesus. The questioner thought he needed to

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needy beggars.*

have his argument satisfied. But Paul reveals that if I'm asking that question, then my eyes are on sin, not on Jesus. By asking that question, I reveal that I haven't *really* heard the gospel and that my heart has not *really* changed. I don't actually need the argument satisfied. What I need is to hear the gospel again because it fell on deaf ears the last time. Scripture is amazingly good at brushing past our heady questions and reminding us that we need the gospel.

If I don't share scripture's focus, then my doctrine is sick. If I don't follow scripture's rivers to the ocean they land in, then my doctrine is sick. If I don't follow scripture to enjoy the God it is about, then my doctrine is sick. Please do be heady. Think hard. Strive hard with all your might! But gear it toward what scripture focuses on and where scripture lands.

Finally, controversy is the enemy of good reading. Sometimes we read a passage and think, "Oh, that proves my point!" Well, whether you're right or wrong on that point, if that steals your focus from the flow of the passage, then your doctrine is already sick. If you read about joy during suffering, and your mind immediately moves to the fallacy of false prosperity teachers, you've probably already left the author's point far behind, and it isn't producing *joy* in your heart like it was intended to. Controversy produces tunnel vision and callouses. We can't see past that issue, and we fail to follow the author's words to their intended destination. You need to table that debate for a while and come back to the Word to simply be taught.

DOES IT AFFECT MY EVERYDAY LIFE?

Scripture should not only affect thoughts and fantasies, but it should also affect actions. Pay attention when scripture commands us and warns us in everyday things. Redemption happens in the mundane, in the everyday, when your boss rides you all day, when you cut your spouse off, when you succeed at something at work, as you're tempted to veg with TV, when your dog spreads poop on your carpet, when lust pulls at your heart, and when you go through sickness. Look for areas where life and scripture differ. Am I a different person at church than I am at home? Am I angry in heavy traffic? Am I selfish with my kids? Am I mirroring God's patience? Do I reflect His justice? Obey in *all* aspects of life. Unapplied scripture is dangerous scripture. It puffs us up in our "volume of knowledge" rather than humbling us by the reality of intimately knowing a universe-creating God.

You should never read a passage of scripture without *planning a change* to how you will live that very day. Something should change in your day every time you read scripture. You can plan a time in the day for your thoughts and daydreams to revolve around what that passage says about God. You can plan a more patient reaction to your kid's disobedience that afternoon. You can plan to trust in a specific attribute of God when work anxieties attack. But *something* should change in response to scripture.

Ask those who know you well where you aren't obeying the scripture you read that morning. Ask your spouse, your roommate, or your best friends. Biblical growth is communal growth, and it lives and breathes in the seemingly innocuous times of life.

I AM THE "BEGINNER," AND I ALWAYS WILL BE

A final quick exhortation about how you read the Word. When you're reading, I guarantee there will be times when you'll be tempted to say, "I already know this. This is for those really young in the faith. I'm past this." Beware when this comes to your mind because

you're in danger! For sure, you may know it, but if you think it's "beginner's stuff," that probably means it's something obvious that's said a lot in scripture. What that also means is that the Bible is focusing on that topic, and therefore you should be too in your daily life. It's precisely the type of reality about God that should be most moving you from moment to moment. Beginner's stuff is the most impactful stuff. It never loses its punch, and we are never without need of correction by it. Seriously. Do you realize that people die as martyrs knowing *only* those realities about God? Knowing barely the atonement, people grow gospel power to say, "You can take my life, but you cannot take my Jesus!" Does it have that kind of power in your own heart? Don't brush past it! Slow down and chew on it, apply it fresh, and let it change you.

- How does seeking to discover what a passage says about *God* before anything else strike you?
- How do you feel about the idea of scripture not *directly* answering some of your questions?
- What about God's character helps assuage your troubles with resting in mystery?
- What about God best speaks to your notions that you have to understand everything perfectly or you've failed?
- Does it make sense how to engage God in prayer and praise as you read or recall scripture? Does enjoying God while reading scripture lighten the burden of this discipline for you?
- Does it click in your heart how it might look for scripture to impact your thoughts and desires on a moment-by-moment basis in life's mundane times?

BORN FROM THE WORD

These are some pointers to help jumpstart your times in the Word as you either begin or further your labor in the Word. In James 1, we find that God birthed us by the Word of truth. He uses this as motivation to actually *do* the Word that we read. We want lives that are breathed out of scripture because we actually *are* breathed out of scripture. We are born from the gospel message that was carried to us by God's will and took root by God's power. James's idea of this is not individual either. Actually, his focus is communal. It's about how we treat our *neighbor*. What you cultivate personally will be a great help to those around you, displaying God to them. Likewise, what others cultivate will be a great help to you. The church does not function on God's mission without the Word. We don't grow in redemption together without the Word.

I want to warn you that apart from laboring in the Word, tasting first-hand sweetness by the Spirit from constantly hearing and meditating on it, you will not grow. Even worse, you will be a poorly functioning body part in your local church, and you will not enjoy and engage God's mission. You will never grow into the faithful tree, which is your union with Christ, until you obey the biblical command to constantly be about the work of meditating on and applying God's Word. You will be stuck, frustrated, joyless, stale, fruitless, useless, and ultimately self-

pointing. I don't want this for you or for your church. I want you to soar in God's work of redemption in your life, and this involves the labor of beholding Him, trusting Him, and obeying Him. There is no expression of God's glory more brilliant than His Word. Revivals came to Israel as they found the lost scrolls of the law. We need His Word.

DO YOU FEEL INADEQUATE? GOOD!

I want to end with some encouragement for those of you who are intimidated about reading the Word. I understand the intimidation entirely. Honestly, I hope you feel that intimidation and inadequacy until the day you die because only then will you read the Word as you should. Does that sound odd? I really do mean it. You will eventually be tempted to come to the Word thinking you "know something." Please, please, please fight that temptation. For sure, we use what we've read before to help interpret what we're reading now. But we approach as empty-handed beggars, longing for God to teach us what He wants to teach us. We do not come with preconceived questions, demanding scripture answer *those* questions. We do not come with preconceived notions, apt to bend scripture to what we "already know" to be true. We must always expect to be confronted and shaped. Each time we approach the Word, we cry anew, "God be gracious to me, a sinner, and make wise this simple fool!" You are in the *perfect* place if you are intimidated and feel inadequate. We don't come to the Word requiring that we understand everything perfectly. Ditch that expectation. If you walk away seeing God more clearly and dwelling with Him more deeply, then something cosmic has happened. So trust Him! Come to the Word confident in *His* ability to be clear, to teach you, and to make wise the simple. Work hard in that confidence.

Rest in His promises. Try this one for starters: "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it." (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24). May that encourage you that while redemption involves great effort from you, it does not *depend* on you. It depends on God's power, and you have a reason to feel confident.

- Has scripture confronted any of your preconceived notions in the past? If so, describe the struggle you went through. Where did God's nature fit into that struggle? How would you struggle differently now?

ACTION

Each day this week, read one chapter of Ephesians. As you read, make sure it brings about at least one change throughout your day to keep your clearer view of God from being unfruitful. Don't feel like you need to write a commentary on each chapter. Simply ask the Spirit to show you what it's saying, ask those simple questions, and enjoy learning more about the God it leads you to. At Legacy, we're big fans of combining things whenever possible. So please combine last week's action with this week's. As you read and digest scripture, also confront your old views of God with what you're learning, and enjoy the God scripture leads you to in aloud or written prayer and praise. Paint in the vivid details of who God is with specifics as you read, and consider what it means for the currently raw areas of your life. Daydream about Him. These prayers and daydreams in which you engage God often with full abandon and vulnerability are the raw material of redemption.

¹ You might cry foul about translations. The goal of a good translation is to be as faithful to the original manuscripts as possible, and many English translations do this extremely well. ESV, NIV, NKJV, and many others are very reliable.

² Words like "law," "judgment," "statutes," "precepts," and "commandments" are a lot richer and more personal than most of us think when we read them. David Powlison puts it so well:

We tend to mishear law...We depersonalize it into a law code unrelated to God's gracious rule. We narrow law to bare-bones commandments, forgetting that "ten commandments" is a misnomer. Those "ten words" reveal our Lord's creating and saving acts, his lovingkindness, generous gifts, good character, promises, warnings, and calling of a people—the interpersonal context for his ten good commands. We forget that these commandments spell out how love works out towards God and our fellow human beings. We forget that the law of Moses includes teaching like this: "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet he will by no means leave the guilty unpunished" (Ex. 34:6—7). When a person like this gives commandments, he spells out how to become just like him. -"Speaking Truth In Love" by David Powlison, New Growth Press.

³ Biblical meditation is not solitary, thoughtless contemplation. It is an active, thoughtful, vivid, corporate, desire-provoking, and tearful enjoyment of who God is and what He's promised.

⁴ The word "righteous" means to be right, in good standing, and approved of before God. People cannot earn this because of our sin. It's something graciously given to us by God because Jesus earned righteousness on behalf of all who trust Him.

⁵ The word "fantasize" might conjure strictly sexual notions, but really it's any movie you play in your head where you're longing for or fixating on something. We're wired to fantasize, and we do it all the time. The real question is what or whom we fantasize about.

CHAPTER 3: ENDURING GRACE FOR TRIALS

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” (James 1:2-7)

CAUGHT IN THE STORM

The picture that comes to mind in this passage is a storm bearing down. One day, in a building gray mountain ahead, you see a flash – and then another and another. Thunder begins to rumble in the background, and the wind starts to pick up. The signs are clear, you know what's coming, and you have time to prepare. Another day, it's perfectly sunny with no cloud in sight. Yet while inside, suddenly a crack of thunder shakes the house, and rain pours down immediately after. Before you know it, the wind is already bearing down, and hail is punishing the shingles.

Seen in advance or not, we all have storms come and go, some small that skirt by and some huge that seem to never relent. Some are marked by a flash of violence that sends us reeling, and some are like the stagnant front that just drops rain for days and days. In the midst of these storms, I imagine from James's language that we are like a tree exposed to the wind, rain, and hail, bending under the strength of that wind. This is how I envision trials in the Christian life.

The washer just broke, and the roof is leaking with no money to fix it. A woman is devastated by sexual assault, burning in anger, fear, and shame with a sense of isolation. A man is given the news that he has leukemia, not knowing how to tell his friends or family. A single man feels almost anonymous in a church that considers singleness as if it were a disability. A pastor is stripped from his family, jailed, and beaten mercilessly for leading an unsanctioned church. An employee overhears the boss discussing how the company is downsizing and feels the stinging fear of not providing for his family. After another hard day's work watching energetic kids, her husband ignores her as he walks in the door and plants squarely in front of the television. Though disgusted and ashamed, having pulled up pornography on his phone twice already today, a man feels the draw to pull it up yet again. Seeing that her fiancé yet again did not consult with her before a big purchase, a woman feels a burning draw toward anger. A couple feels hesitant to even talk to God after losing their precious baby girl, after praying and begging for healing. Yet another day, a woman struggles under a heavy burden of depression, feeling stagnant, and wondering when life will finally “begin.”¹

Any size storm carries with it temptations to feel exposed, confused, overwhelmed, bitter, angry, defeated, alone, or hopeless. A lot of times, it does help just to know that you're in a storm, to realize when you're being pressed and how. It's not just in suffering that our faith

is tried but in the lure toward sin as well. To still feel desires for sin moving in the heart is a good cause for mourning. Also, being a victim of sin is, in and of itself, an inherent temptation to sin yourself: vindication, detachment, unforgiveness, and idolatrous “medicating.” Keeping the eyes from glazing over while reading James 1, how do we truly count all of this as *joy*? Doesn’t that feel somewhat mocking at first glance? We have our Sunday answers during times of calm, and yet those can seem so distant in the middle of any real storm. We need something that stands firm through the storm, something sure though all else should fall into chaos. What reason does James give? What exactly does God expect of us? What could possibly make any difference in how we live through difficulty?

ENDURING THE STORM

There’s no need to further postpone the grace James shows us. Storms produce enduring trees, and that endurance itself is a major means God uses to bring our salvation full to the end. What is most at stake in this endurance is a heart that is anchored solely in the trustworthiness of a loving God, who is in control. We cannot miss from verse 3 and the focus of 5-7 that this is an endurance primarily of *faith*. God is revealing, reinforcing, and growing your trust in Him. What we have here in the beginning of James is the same grace we see over and over in the Word: (1) commands to obey, (2) truths of God’s nature and promises, (3) exhortations to trust.

To carry on this tree analogy, think of the roots as our outstretched arms, reaching in hope and desperation for anchoring and for water. As we stretch out to God for refuge, He is the ground that holds us firmly when the storms of life threaten to uproot us. He causes us to endure, and in enduring we learn confidence: how to think little of the storm compared to this God who anchors and delights us (Hebrews 2:12). Two things drive our roots deep: lack of water (think Psalm 63) and raging storms (think Psalm 46).

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What is an opposite picture to endurance, and why would we not endure? James tells us: “the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.” One person endures the harshest storm, losing only limbs but remaining steadfast in his or her faith. The other has no anchor whatsoever and is carried away without resistance by any rogue current. And notice that the reason we do not endure is because we do not trust God (“the one who doubts”). Like Adam, we doubt God, take Him for someone more like ourselves, and snatch by our own means what we think we need most. There is a clear, cohesive point coming out in James 1 (all of James really). James is telling us about endurance, the fruit of endurance, the source for endurance, and the dissection of failure.

THE SOURCE FOR ENDURANCE

The most important part of this is the *source* for endurance. The source is God Himself. The means is seeing Him for who He is and trusting Him. So the real question is, “What kind of person is God?” Until we see Him as He is, until we lift up His character and promises, and until

He works within our desires, we will not trust Him. This is why James is bent on displaying of God to us as he exhorts us to trust and warns us against distrust. It might shock you how much James actually says about God.

GOD IS APPROACHABLE

God is unexpectedly approachable because He gives without reproach (verse 5). He does not lash us for our failings and is not passive aggressive toward our neediness. Even if I deserve to be mocked and belittled by God, He will not do it because He poured out all of the wrath I earned by sin on His Son, fully atoning for me. Not only this, but I was given Jesus's righteousness so that when He looks at me, He actually

delights in seeing an obedient son. In Jesus, I too am the son of His public affection. He declares in front of all, "This is my son! I am so pleased with him!" He does not reproach. I also think how Jesus is a sympathetic High Priest, giving us confidence in drawing near to God (Hebrews 4:14-16). If I imagine God as spurning, looming, cold, and distant, I am beholding someone different than the God of scripture. He is wholly different than we expect. God is not like us.

He does not lash us for our failings and is not passive aggressive toward our neediness.

GOD IS LAVISH

He is unexpectedly lavish to give so generously (verse 5). He gives no bare minimum for what we need, but He pours out embarrassingly great mercy like the father of the prodigal son. This is the God who said to Adam, "Don't forget this, Adam. I have given you every good thing." This is the God of Jeremiah 2, who declares that we have forsaken a sure source of

sweet, running water. This is the God of Malachi who dared His people to test His generosity. As Romans says it, God crushed His own deeply loved Son to atone for us while we were at our worst. So of course He will give us everything else with abandon. As Ephesians says it, this is the God who displayed His power by raising Jesus to prove to us the unquestionable reach of His power in us. This is a *generous* God. He is open-handed, and we do not have to pry out His favor, His Spirit, or His delight. God is not like us.

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GOD EXALTS THE HUMBLE AND HUMBLER THE PROUD

This is a God who humiliates the proud and exalts the lowly (verses 9-11). The same God who called some particularly haughty leaders "children of the devil" also bent down low in the dirt to defend a guilty whore. The God who scattered self-consumed people into all corners of the Earth from Babel also promises to gather His own people from every nation, tribe, and tongue on Earth. This God utterly destroyed Pharaoh to make a mockery of him and his gods. Yet He also intimately brought His people on eagle's wings to Himself to be His treasure (Exodus 19:4-6). He cannot be ignored by the proud, and no shame is ever beyond His intimate lifting. While we envy the rich and pity the poor, God is not like us.

GOD MADE A HOME

He has promised an inheritance for His people (verse 12). This is no small thing to take in stride and immediately move on. As Peter says: “set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13). Paul expresses it like a pregnant woman groaning in agony for her child to be born (Romans 8:18-25), and he uses this as reason for patient waiting. In this inheritance, there will be no more trial, and evil desire itself will pass out of existence (1 John 2:17). We will see, savor, and long for only God because we will be wholly and intimately with Him in perfect shalom (Revelation 19:6-10) for the rest of existence, which does not end because He does not end (Psalm 90:2). Death is dead forever, sickness loses meaning altogether (1 Corinthians 15:50-58), and lack will be like a faint hint of a bad dream that is ever waning out of memory. God Himself is the light by which we even see, and there is no ceasing of this light. Night is an impossibility (Revelation 22:1-5). This is an inheritance so weighty with deep joy that all present suffering is like a weight to fling aside by comparison (Romans 8:18, Hebrews 12:2). Please, please, please don’t let this lose its punch! Heaven is *the* greatest hope of the suffering, and we are all suffering. Think about it. This overpowers even rape without diminishing its horrible impact. It overcomes the horrors of slavery. It outweighs the bitter loss of children. It belittles any mockery, exposure, or shame. It makes disability insignificant by comparison. It overwhelms our temptations to seek riches and ease. It does this by overwhelming that which overwhelms us. While we cannot guarantee what we promise, God is not like us.

*Death is dead forever,
sickness loses meaning
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GOD WORKS TOWARD OUR TRUST

God never tempts us toward unbelief. He only gives us good things (verses 13 and 17). Temptations to sin, hooks toward bitterness, drawing toward despair, rushes of social shame – none of this comes from God. That comes from our own nature, how we have rebelled against God and have become very unlike Him. We are drawn away by our own desires, our fallen worship, and our godless thoughts. On the contrary, God is drawing us *toward* trust, always displaying Himself to His people and infusing faith in our hearts by the Spirit’s powerful revealing. The thrust of this attribute is showing God’s *intention* in ordaining the trial: that He is for us and not against us and that He works toward our faith and not toward our distrust.

This is not wordplay where God, like a child, is holding His finger a millimeter away saying, “I’m not touching.” Though “tempt” and “trial” are the same word in this passage, the context is clear that God cannot be *budged* toward evil nor does He attempt to *push* us toward evil. He ordains the trial and allows it in His wisdom (a wisdom we cannot begin to understand), but we cannot accuse Him of leading us to sin. Our own sinful desires lead us to sin, not God

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or the trials He ordains. This is similar to the fact that law is not evil; yet through it, sin inflames us with all kinds of evil desire (Romans 7:7-8). The trial is not evil, and is it not intended to push us toward evil. Yet our sin, through it, moves us to distrust. James displays a God wholly unlike we expect, and this lures us toward trust to remain steadfast in any trial. You must see that He is not vindictive, or else He did not exhaust His wrath on Christ in your place. He is for you, friend, and He has the power to accomplish what He wants. While we may draw others to fall because of our envy and pride, God is not like us.

GOD IS STEADFAST AND UNCHANGING

God is the definition of steadfast and cannot be moved by anything external to Himself (verses 17-18). This is like the lid on the container. With God, there is no hint of changing His ways, His nature, or His promises. Why? Because He brought us forth *of His own will* by the gospel, the word of truth. We serve a sovereign God “who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Ephesians 1:11). The Psalmist declares and the author of Hebrews reminds us: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind” (Psalm 110:4, Hebrews 7:21). By God, we “were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance” (Ephesians 1:13). Job, who knew trial as much as any save only Christ Himself, declared boldly: “But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind” (Job 23:13-14). God is no wave to be tossed nor is He even a tree. “The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe” (Proverbs 18:10). He that brought you out of a storm yesterday will not fail you today. He that does not fail you today can be trusted restfully for tomorrow, overwhelming our anxieties. While we ficklely ebb and flow, God is not like us.

GOD IS OUR SURE ANCHOR IN STORMS

Were we a wave in the ocean, God is the anchor tethering us to His promises and grace. Were we a tree in a storm, God is the sure ground that does not weaken though logged with moisture. God is approachable, as we have an understanding and faithful High Priest. God is lavish, as we are given Jesus’s blessing instead of our curse. God is protective of His name, as Jesus is the only honor we can claim yet also the supreme honor in all creation. God is faithful to provide a future home, secured by Jesus and free of everything He hates, meaning we will enjoy Him forever, unplagued by sin and suffering. God is good to us and never evil to us because we are atoned for by Jesus. God does not change, as we are hid in Jesus to be kept blameless and “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24). In fact, though we are not fully like God, as we behold Him, we do become more like Him.

- What is it about your storms you find most intimidating? What is it that tends to steal your apprehension and respect the most?
- What about God in the section “The source for endurance” most spoke to you? Describe how He addresses your intimidations.
- What about God most helps you rest that you will actually make it to the end?

WHAT IS EXPECTED THROUGH THE STORM

I also don't want to miss the fact that endurance means just that: that we *stand by faith* while under trial. This is what is expected. Trees will lose branches, they will shed leaves, and they will suffer damage by hail. But the roots will hold, ultimately because the soil (God) holds them. We will feel the storm. We will be damaged and hurt. We will feel overwhelmed, and it will certainly *feel* at times like we cannot stand under it. We wouldn't have these passages if trials were by any means easy. We will surely be swayed, and the heart will surely be pulled quite strongly. Desire will lure, and belief will be tried. We may even go for a while in lustful thought, in embittered anger, or in hopeless despair. The heart will wage its war. In this, we are called to *stand firm in our trust in the Lord* throughout the storm. Our eyes move to God.

Paul says this so graciously in 1 Corinthians 10:13: "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." The ultimate application of this verse is that if it's confronting you, it is *not* beyond His provision for your endurance. Notice the goal there too: "that you may be able to endure it."

Paul is referring there to the trials of Israel in the wilderness after their rescue from Egypt. In these trials, they moved back to their old idols, they hoped in false gods, they accused the true God who rescued them, and they grumbled against God's provision at every turn. They are the antitype of Jesus, who obeyed in the wilderness because He trusted His Father. Now, we are wrapped in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit gives us Jesus's mind to think His thoughts and desire His desires. This union with Jesus is our only hope for enduring as Jesus did. As you find the time, please do read through Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers to see the full extent of what Paul is referring to here. It's so helpful to see their story, to imagine it, to place your story in it, and to discover what trusting and enjoying God in the wilderness really looks like.

You are not told to be free of hurt or to be unaffected. God cares about the pain, and given that these are called trials, I think pain is expected. You are told to cry out to your Refuge and latch onto His promises for dear life, pressing ever and further down into the soil that holds you, drinking the sweet water that overcomes the fright of the storm. Does the promise feel foreign? Cry, "I believe, help my unbelief!" Does He feel untrustworthy? Dig down deep into Jesus: what He has done for you and still does for you. Does it seem like God cannot satisfy you because the pull of this person practically defines you? Then dig down deep into the protective shepherd who knows His pastures and His streams well and will never lead you to anything but good. *Know the Person Himself*. Trust has no other context.

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they will shed leaves, and
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UGLY BATTLE, BUT ULTIMATELY GOD'S BATTLE

There will be times when you spend an hour enduring under the weight of a band in the storm, catch your breath for 10 minutes, and then find yourself under another band again. This is the reality for many of our trials. They can seem persistent, and it can feel like you're spinning

wheels at times. Remember 1 Corinthians 10:13, and do not grow weary while standing fast in a God who *still* hasn't changed! It's all right that it feels overwhelming. Call your family in Christ, grab a cup of coffee, go for a run, do some pushups, cry out to God, and turn your pain Godward in prayer. Complain to *God*, and not to yourself. This is common practice with the Psalmists. Right in the middle of the worst trials come extremely sweet times of fellowship with God, deep times we will never forget. Any sister or brother who's endured will attest to that. God is able to satisfy in the difficult wilderness. He really is.

Often, we come to realize that we might not actually have that much trust in God at the moment. He might often seem detached, distant, and awkward. Often, this is because we've been hardened by sins we're currently wading in. Often, it's because we don't have much practice enjoying and trusting God. Sin vies for our attention like a child in a tantrum. Our desires yank toward ungodliness, and sin's deception begins to paint God as colorless by comparison. We feel weak. Sin becomes almost helplessly enticing, and God starts to fade. We feel the storm raging in our desires. It's ugly. It's wrenching. This is *precisely* when we need to run hard, hard, hard after God, reading His Word, crying out for help, and falling empty-handed before an unexpected God who actually welcomes us and delights in us when we feel the least deserving. We must remember Him, taste Him, and enjoy Him in order to overcome the storm.

This is the gritty picture of enduring a storm. It's so exhilarating to experience enduring by faith. While enduring, and especially after enduring, we meet deep, satisfying fellowship with God that is like gulps of water to the dying. It is so refreshing to endure by faith, to walk with Jesus in the Father's delight, trusting Him, and enjoying Him.

GOD, GIVE ME ONE THING

When I'm overwhelmed and in the middle of the sheer insanity of sinful desires, I make a common practice of crying out to the Spirit: "*Please, just give me one thing about you that I know from scripture – just one thing to hold onto for now, just one thing to build from.*" He has never failed me in that request. Not once. Not even close.

For instance, one time I prayed this, and "You never change" came to my mind. So I went with it. I prayed, "God help me understand one small thing that this means in real life, just one." The Spirit put in my mind, "That means that even though desiring You is extremely tough right now, and even though You feel distant, You're *still* rescuing me. You haven't left." That led me to pray, "You don't change because Jesus already died for me and rescued me when I was at my worst." Then, "That means you aren't disgusted that I'm coming to you right now. You're actually delighted. You should be disgusted, but you spent that on Jesus instead of me. It's so hard for me to fathom that you actually delight in me. How is this possible? God, thank you so much for welcoming me when I know I deserve the opposite. Show me what it means that you see me like Jesus." Then, more and more tiny, deep specifics came, one by one, until my heart was absolutely rejoicing. My desires, at last, had changed. I was moved from flesh to Spirit.

What does your own train from flesh to Spirit look like? What simple, specific realities of God, one by one, rescue you in the full rage of the storm? Pray through this, and write it down.

*Please, just give me
one thing about you –
just one thing to hold
onto for now, just one
thing to build from.*

LET STEADFASTNESS HAVE ITS FULL EFFECT

This is a storm, and God ordained it for your overwhelming good. Don't fall prey to thinking that your freedom in Jesus means ease or that intense difficulty means that you aren't free. Freedom is a *Person*, and we run to Him during swelling circumstances. We live in the *real* prosperity gospel, not the cheap knock-off that promises mere things. True prosperity is a God who reveals Himself more fully to widening eyes, deepens our trust, and brings us complete and full to the end of His intimate and vast salvation. God is our prosperity, so we shouldn't let the cheap knock-off steal such a beautiful word. We believe in a ridiculously prosperous gospel! It *is* a prosperity gospel. It is absolutely astounding that we get God Himself! We get unbelievable riches when we get God, and nothing else comes even remotely close.

We should be careful wanting to calm the storm too quickly with our exclamations of "if only" and "if I could just get there." What if we did "get there" and then ceased realizing our need for God? This is far more dangerous a trial than overwhelming circumstances because we tend to forget God during ease. We humans are quick to do that. To be aware of our need for God's rescue is to be in an incredibly *healthy* place.

In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, we see God's heart in ordaining the trials by an example from Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Without the storm being overwhelming for us, we would not see ourselves for who we really are. We would not see God for who He really is. There is something profound that happens during these storms as He shakes us loose of the hold of idols and we come to realize that God puts them all to shame. We cannot understand the immensity of God's provision in Jesus until our other provisions are cast off the throne, until our other loves, hopes, and longings are forsaken for a powerful, present God. This is steadfastness and its effect: knowing God more deeply and enjoying Him more intimately. Intimacy with God is well worth the endurance and difficulty!

"MEDICATING"

The word, "medicating," is intended to mean *sinning* in order to make a trial diminish. It's describing what happens when we do not stand fast under trial but desire ease more than we desire to see God more clearly. Usually, we medicate because it's difficult to trust God, and therefore we trust in ourselves and try to control things with our own hands. I'm tired of being tempted with lust, and I'm feeling extremely lonely, so I just look up pornography and masturbate to ditch the difficulty for now. I feel dead and calloused, it's been a hard day at work, and the kids are just ridiculous, so I drink and take a Percocet to feel alive if only for a little while. I can't bear to look at my husband after knowing what he did two months ago, so I turn to outbursts of anger to release the immense pressure of fear and pain welling up in me. For sure, I have legitimate difficulty. Yet, in that difficulty, I am distrusting, protective, controlling, and self-fixating. I walk as if God were not with me at all, and therefore I take measures into my own hands.

In every storm, there typically seems to be a "release valve" that will make the storm quickly relent. For Jesus, this was Satan trying to lure Him to short circuit the cross and gain glory without obedient suffering. It was Jesus's trust in the Father that kept Him from being budged by this temptation. On one side of the coin, these release valves are leaky holes in the

ground (Jeremiah 2) bound to leave us thirsty, and the storm will inevitably return with a vengeance. On the other side, we reinforce a distrust toward God, which makes trust more difficult in the next storm. When we do not stand fast, we do not let steadfastness have its full effect. Our trust grows stale and calloused. We become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, and in that hardened state, we continue to suffer and sin.

Steadfastness always has a beautiful outcome: God is beheld and desired, and we are fully satisfied.

However, when we come out of the trial standing fast and obeying by trust, we see God more clearly and know Him far more intimately. My experience is that standing fast by faith also leads to a strong peace on the other side of the storm and much deeper enjoyment from seeing God more clearly. Steadfastness always has a beautiful outcome: God is seen clearly and desired, and we are so deeply satisfied in that desire.

LOOSE DIRT

There is only one way to endure through trials, and that is a rooted trust in God. But amid daily life, we often dig into “loose dirt” during times of trial, dirt that fools us and gives way under pressure. It is my daily living, not what I confess to believe, that most reveals my heart: my true doctrine. I glorify loose dirt above God when I dig into it rather than anchoring down in His nature. This is something I inherently spread to others around me as well, suppressing God’s glory and leading others to share in my mistakes. Also, no other soil except God remains solid amid *all* of life’s uncertainties. Let’s take a look at some of the loose dirt we unwisely dig into when storms bear down on us.

NUMBERS AND CHANCES

Many times, we place our hopes for endurance in numbers. Suppose I am diagnosed with a potentially fatal cancer. I may rise and fall with the chances my doctor gives me for survival. Yet, rooted in the reality that I am protected with Christ in heaven, my biggest hopes remain untouched, regardless of what may happen to my body. In friendship with a lost person I’ve come to love, I may look at their context and lifestyle and “place my bets” on whether they’ll believe the gospel. My hopes are attached to their lifestyle and not to the changing power of the gospel and God’s infinite wisdom and kindness in choosing His people. Chances are not a good hope for us. It’s not wrong to be moved by chances, but we must have a harder soil to anchor us regardless of what we think the chances may be. God isn’t intimidated by contexts or numbers, nor is He bound by them. This trust isn’t a dismissive one. It isn’t shallow or quick. But it overwhelms all other hopes as we dwell with a real, present God.

WILLPOWER

Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, and by no means will I ever suggest that we live uncontrolled lives. But self-control is just that: a fruit of the Spirit. This means that we only really have it when we are walking step in step with the Spirit. It is a relational gift given to us as we run our race with our eyes fixed on Jesus. It is not self-contrived. I do not muster it up. I do

not dig down deep within myself to find power to stick to my will. I also do not root my willpower in another person's inspiration. Many people are able to stick to a plan and change by self-contrived willpower. Some lost people are better at this than many saved people, in fact. But the real thing at stake in all of this is not whether I accomplish my will or whether I stick to my guns. The real thing at stake is *who is glorified and displayed*: is it me, or is it God? A godless willpower is a God-defaming willpower. We must "stick to our guns" by beholding a God who never changes. We are inspired by *His* glory, not ours. It's still gritty, and we still dig down deep and endure through great feats, but we dig into God's awe-inspiring nature.

FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Often, when struggling with sin in particular, we point ourselves and others to a final hope of family. To the meth addict, we say as an ultimate end, "You could lose your family!" For sure, we are called to be faithful to our families, to stay with them through thick and thin. But this is no power to hold us when all else fails. In fact, we aren't guaranteed our family or our friends. Were this Job's best hope, he would have caved and cursed God immediately. Also, what about the times when our spouse is the exact opposite of what we feel we need? What about when our friends lose patience? We aren't guaranteed anyone's steadfastness in particular except God's. God is worthy of everything we have. There are many reasons why God is far more reliable soil than family and friends. While it isn't wrong to strongly desire keeping family and friends, and while this can move us, we need something more firm. We need God.

"OTHERS HAVE IT WORSE" OR "IT'S ALL RIGHT"

This is a phrase we say often in our pain, but I think that in its furthest progression it is no more than, "Chin up, champ, it's not that bad." Taken to its root, there's no substance at all. Is it true that others in this world are experiencing pain far more than you? Absolutely. Does this mean that your pain is therefore meaningless and unworthy of thought? I don't think so. In fact, this doesn't address the pain at all. It simply puts a nicer-looking face to an age-old "good people don't feel anger and pain" stoicism. Perhaps it's a reaction against pity, saying that trials need to be at a certain intensity before we warrant pity. But the reality is that we warrant no good thing in and of ourselves regardless. And God gives us something so much more valuable than pity. He gives us atonement, invasion, jealous love, and able compassion. Self-speak affirmations of "It's all right" have no grounds to them either. I need to know *why* things will "just work out." When I say that, it's as if I'm merely trying to distract myself from a bad situation and pacify things. It may seem to work for a while. It may not. Regardless, it leaves me godless, alone, and at best lifting up myself. You need a *reason* why things are going to work out for good, a reason that endures. And the best reason is a person, a wise, powerful, involved God who works literally everything together toward a destination that is best for us.

YOUR STATUS

You could lose your job, your chances for promotion, your position at church, or the respect of the people around you. Because of this, endure in abstaining from your addiction. This is a line of thinking we often take. Besides lifting up your status as your ultimate joy,

worthy of your deepest worship (and dethroning God), the fact is that you might lose it all anyway. Your position of leader, teacher, deacon, or elder within the church can be taken from you whether you sin or not.

We must be willing to trash our status for God's glory.

God has you in this place for His glory this moment, but He gives no guarantees that you'll stay there. Your job is a place where you can display His character as you work hard, but the Bible gives no guarantees for your employment. Your respect earns you a voice in peoples' hearts, a voice you should be willing to leverage and lose entirely for God's name's sake. These things are not reliable. They are temporary gifts meant to be leveraged and potentially lost at any time if it lifts up God's name on Earth. Our biblical call is not to endure so that we can keep worldly gifts as our hope. Our biblical call is to hold them in an open hand, willing to waste them all by God's leading if it will glorify Him more than leveraging them in another way. We must be willing to trash our status for God's glory. He alone is our hope, and He is well worth it.

HOW WILL YOU FEEL AFTERWARD?

"How will you feel afterward? What would your future self say?" Yes, I've been there. I tried to endure by this thought at one point in my life. I encouraged others to do so as well. It's a little twist on self-speak. If you continue to abstain from your addiction, you will be better in the future. And that person, your future you, is begging you to see what you could be if you endure in abstinence. This is a longer-term version of "consider how you'll feel afterward, how let down you'll be." What is my primary hope in all of this? My momentary pleasure and my long-term pleasure. And in all of it, I am still godless and ultimately alone, keeping company either with myself or "my future self," a complete figment of my imagination who is still nowhere near the glory of God. The biblical question is much closer to: How does God feel about this as He watches you do it? Why does His atonement mean so little to you? Why doesn't His nature move you? Why are you ignoring His glory? God is our endurance. We stay because He keeps us. Our eyes belong on *Him*.

- In your own prayers of "God, just give me one thing," what is your own starting point for remembering what kind of person God is? What does it look like for you to build from there and desire Him more deeply?
- What "medications" or "release valves" seem most appealing to you when things get tough and your emotions betray you in the moment?
- What "loose dirt" do you tend to run to for help when things get raw? It doesn't have to be one written in this chapter.

SUSTAINED IN THE WILDERNESS

The full effect of steadfastness is a perfected trust that is complete and lacking nothing. These individual storms are collectively one storm, trying and refining us as we walk through the wilderness with our great need and God's great provision. It's just like Israel walking through the wilderness between Egypt (our captivity under sin) and the Promised Land (us

dwelling with God forever). The wilderness lacks what we had in “Egypt,” it exposes where we wrongly trust, and it builds a trust in God that cannot be shaken. This happens frequently and often, and I want you to be encouraged that this is normal. This is life in the wilderness. When we have stood fast during the wilderness, we will be with Jesus face to face.

Just having a way to interpret the difficulty you’re facing is often a great help. Having a story context to make sense of why things are so hard helps us to endure to the end. Being able to see the immense pain as life in the wilderness led by a God who loves you so much is like a bed to the fainting. Seeing Christ suffer with us and even *for* us, belittling the shame of the cross because of the joy set before Him, is a light piercing into the disillusionment. We are sojourning just like the Israelites fresh out of Egypt, guided through the harsh wilderness by cloud and fire,

We are sojourning just like the Israelites fresh out of Egypt, guided through the harsh wilderness, provided for reliably by God’s generous grace, and called His treasured possession.

provided for reliably by God’s generous grace, and called His treasured possession in all the Earth, a nation of priests. After enduring with great joy because of God’s great provision for us, we cross the river and enter the Promised Land. Where Israel failed in faithlessness toward God, Jesus never stumbled in His unwavering trust in the Father. It brings me a lot of joy to see Jesus go through the wilderness with no food or water, bearing under the trial of temptation during suffering, and honoring the Father because He trusts Him.

By a lamb slain and by manna from God, Israel escaped Egypt’s cruelty and survived the wilderness. Yet, we see from their grumbling that they needed a deeper Rescue and a better Manna, as do we. Jesus willingly endured the cross to become our true Lamb slain and willingly entered the wilderness to become our true Manna. Seeing how Jesus obeyed on my behalf, gave me His Spirit, and became for me freedom and rich provision here in the wilderness, I know that I too can rest, trust, and obey as Jesus did under trial. I imagine myself and my family in Christ going through that same wilderness, pressed and tested, and constantly looking to God to say, “You are so good to us, bearing us on eagle’s wings out of sin to bring us to Yourself. You are better than sin, and Your provision and promises never fail us. Come quickly, Lord, we want only You! Lead us up your mountain and be near to us! May the whole Earth know You!” Jesus’s provision, God’s glory on display for us, is our source of endurance in the wilderness.

SUMMARY

Steadfastness reveals idols because we will feel the sting of temptation toward other hopes and identities. Steadfastness refines and builds our trust in God as we come to see how He never fails us even once. We find that no situation, brought on by sin or not, makes any of His promises untrue at any time. Steadfastness under trial leads to heaven when its work is complete. So please let steadfastness have its

The carrot dangling on the other side of trials is seeing God more clearly and enjoying Him more richly.

full effect. The carrot dangling on the

other side of trials, that spurs our steadfastness, is seeing God more clearly and enjoying Him more richly. *God* is the carrot. We endure because we want *Him*.

- How do you picture yourself engaging God in tough moments instead of “medicating”? Describe it in detail.
- In raw times, envisioning a real situation of you ripping your eyes away from the storm and digging into God’s nature, what would your prayer sound like? What would your emotions do? What would you physically do?
- Can you envision the grace that awaits you on the other side of this storm after you’ve endured, secure in who God is? In your own words, how do you foresee this endurance *changing* you? What will it be like?

ACTION

This week’s action has three parts. Please do the first two now. The third, you do each day this week.

1. Identify a real storm in your life that you face every day. It could be a torrent of anxieties in the morning or in the evening. It could be self-abasing thoughts. It could be temptation to anger or lust. It could be a number of things, but it must be real, tangible, and an identifiable *event*.
2. Plan out how you envision yourself running to God in the middle of this storm, anchoring down deep in real things about who He is and what He’s done. Write out a prayer of recalling who God is, repentance, praise, awe, desperation, and enjoyment that speaks to this storm. Consider how the storm will try to steal your attention and respect. What about God will overcome this?
3. Do what you’ve planned out each day this week as that storm comes. By all means, change your plan as you go along, find where it was naïve, find where it was lacking, or find where it could be deeper or more effective. But endure with God, forsaking faulty anchors and the sinful exits.

Go ahead and combine each week’s action into the next week’s action. Each day, be reading some scripture and coming to the real God through it. You could do this while you’re running to God in your storm. You could do it that morning or evening and use what you learn to fuel your endurance through storms. Be creative, and combine them.

¹ Please don’t take this as considering all of these trials as equal because they are not. The point is that they are all indeed trials, even if they look different, even if they are strengthened or brought on by your own sin. And they all find their sole rescue and help in the same source.

CHAPTER 4: SUFFERING, TRUSTING, AND RESTING

Is there anything that threatens to distance us from God more than suffering? Suffering is loud and tumultuous. It often seems relentless. It demands our attention and plays for our respect and apprehension. Like Peter in a swelling, intimidating sea, we're all so apt to let the storm tear our eyes away from Jesus. We

Distance from God is the biggest sting suffering has in its arsenal.

often let our circumstances paint God as distant, powerless, or uncaring. Yet even more than that, we just forget Him altogether in the torrent around us. Regardless of what defines our distance from God during suffering, that *distance* is the biggest sting suffering has in its arsenal. Apart from God, I have little reason to rest in comfort and little reason for hope or joy. With God, I still hurt deeply, but I have an unshakable, very present Refuge in times of pain: a Refuge who actually understands my situation even more than I do, a Refuge who cares and will act.

Suffering carries with it really tough questions, and I want to work through some of them. These aren't easy questions we pacify on eggshells with Sunday School answers. They're deep, gritty questions that stain our hands with clay and mud. How we address them in our daily lives and in our hearts will either breathe life to us or suffocate us with further distance from God. So let's get our hands dirty with these questions like the Psalmists.

The driving story in here expresses real troubles in real peoples' lives, and it shows us the foggy mess of suffering and sin that intertwine in our own lives. Perhaps your story is even foggier and more tumultuous. Perhaps it is less so. God's power and clarity are not intimidated by cloudiness. Nor is His compassion stayed by what you consider "menial." God's Word and the Holy Spirit, through the message of what Jesus does for us through the cross, pierce through our bewilderment to bring us to a God who applies tangibly and powerfully to our grey lives. Faith means real and creative change in any situation.

DID THEY GET AWAY WITH IT?

THE DELUGE

Diane is married with four kids, and she genuinely trusts and follows Christ. She and her husband, Will, are a respected family in their church. One day, Diane suddenly finds out that Will has not only been unfaithful to her but has been so for many years. He had been carrying on a separate life at gay clubs and sleeping anonymously with countless men from online classifieds. One night, Will's conscience finally breaks, and he dumps it all on her like cement: shocking at first yet hardening into a dismal reality in the days to come. She breaks down into tears that moment but quickly retreats into stunted emotion. This is partly for a break from dealing with things, partly because some of her sincerely wants to be forgiving, and partly just not to rip his head off.

It's hard to describe the rush of emotions flooding over Diane over the months to come. She is livid that Will treated her with such disregard for so long. She wonders if she will ever be able to believe another word he says. She feels abandoned because she has cared for their

children while Will has shrugged off responsibility to lie and pursue his own pleasures apart from her. She feels unlovely because he doesn't desire her. She's really confused about his sexual orientation, not really able to process that at the moment. She fears for her health, that maybe she has contracted a disease from his careless behavior. And to cap it all off, Will sometimes acts as if he were the primary victim in this picture. Some friends tell her to ditch him while others tell her that to leave is wrong. Conflicted, lonely, and seemingly bleeding out, she strains to regain normal, to grab control, to not be so exposed and disoriented.

There is such a complex, tangled mess of suffering and sin in Diane's heart that she just feels overwhelmed. The foremost thought that comes to her head, though, is the maddening notion that he has just gotten away with it all and she just has to forgive him now. How dare he do this to her and expect her to simply forgive him. What about the terrible pain he has caused her? What about the mess she is left to clean up? She is left to be the responsible one. How can he just get away with this? He has to pay for what he's done!

THIS QUESTION REALLY MATTERS

Did they get away with it? So much rides on the answer. We have very good reasons to ask it. We're hardwired to ask it. We need God to meet us in this question if we will ever shake loose from the chains of anger, control, vindication, and unforgiveness. We will either take vindication into our own hands sinfully, or we will leave it in God's hands trustfully and obediently. But we cannot rest in trust in a God we do not *know*. How does God feel about the sins against me? What is He doing about it? Is He trustworthy to do what should be done? We need to *know* Him in order to make sense of our suffering. We need to know Him before we can rest in Him obediently and find healing.

How does God feel about the sins against me? What is He doing about it? Is He trustworthy to do what should be done?

The simple answer is: No, and by no means! No, he did not get away with this, and he never will. The trapper of Psalm 10 only thinks he gets away with it, but God is infuriated and angry beyond measure, far more angry than you or I are. Are you absolutely livid? It still pales in comparison to God's anger at wickedness. Those who are sinned against can place their trust in God because in the end, God will bring *justice*. It may not be immediate, but it absolutely will come. We cast our eyes to that day. As the Psalmists say, "We will not be put to shame."

GOD'S SOBERING FURY TOWARD THE WICKED

I want to begin answering this question with the hot, burning fury of God at those who prey on the innocent. Consider His hot fury as He broke Egypt's back, killing their firstborn, inflicting plagues, and drowning their army into complete ruin. Consider how He rained down fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, who routinely raped visitors instead of giving them protection. In the flood, mankind thought only evil continually all the time. God killed every last one of them, while saving Noah's family to stay true to His promises to Abraham of a Messiah to bless all families of the Earth. When Israel whored themselves out, taking advantage of the daughters and wives of an enemy nation, God killed half of their army by disease and just as many of the

other army that presented their precious daughters and wives like a meat platter. He is angry when the innocent suffer. He is angry when we sin and when we are sinned against. In His love for us, He is provoked and not passive. I can't imagine any human can read this paragraph and not sink in their stomach in light of the weight of God's wrath. It really is scary. It really is hard to take in. And it is intended to be. Reaction is right.

God's fury is frightening by anyone's standards, and evil does not escape His sight. It's important to know this about Him. He exercises justice on a scale far greater than we can imagine, mainly because the sin is more grievous against Him than it is against us. King David recognized this after he took advantage of Bathsheba, murdered her husband, and then hid it all (until a prophet drew him out). To God, he said, "against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." (Psalm 51). This is a statement of *relative* severity. To sin against a human who is also sinful does not compare against sinning against God who is perfect. This doesn't minimize sin in the horizontal by any means. It *amplifies* the offense in the vertical. When we sin against other humans, it is evil, wrong, deep, and extremely damaging. When we sin against God, though, it is cosmic.

We have rebelled against God, accused Him, defamed Him, and suppressed His glory from view by our sin. All the while, He is the one most deserving of obedience, thanksgiving, honor, and display in all existence. The idea of abusing a newborn is infuriating because of her innocence. So consider the offense of

*The right reaction to hell is
to be wrecked and
unsettled.*

abusing the only true innocent person that has ever existed. Our sin against God is infinite by comparison, and His anger and wrath are proportionate to this. The ultimate, straightforward expression of His wrath is eternal torment, eternal absence from Himself, eternal longing with no quenching. It is something that should shake some sense into us. The right reaction to hell is to be wrecked and unsettled. Anyone who talks of hell without emotion is either not understanding it or they've lost essential human attributes of compassion and fear.

OUR OWN REALITY CHECK

We must know the heat of His justice and the extent of the sin against Himself before we will trust Him to wisely and properly vindicate wrongs done against us. Seeing the real offense and the just punishment, I don't think that any of us can lightly say we like the idea of God's wrath landing on another person. It's sobering. It takes us by surprise. Our hand is only stayed as we come to know this God as He really is.

We also need to be careful here because God's anger is not only against those who have wronged us. We too have defamed God, masked His glory, rebelled against Him, and wronged our own neighbors. Outright justice will be severe toward you and me because we too have been not only the sufferer but the culprit as well. While under sin, we are trapped in a dungeon with others, not only suffering the use of torture devices on us but using them against others as well. Suffering is no excuse for sinning, and we do sin.

Thankfully (which seems far too light a word to express the true emotion), it was God's *pleasure* before the world was created that this would never be the only or final say regarding justice. The true apex of His wrath has actually already happened. Eternity past longed for this

moment, and present and eternity future look back on this moment with awe. Jesus Christ, God in human flesh, God's only Son, took the full impact of God's anger toward sin *entirely* for every last person who has, does, or ever will trust Him. God's fury landed on Jesus for many people, for all different, diverse kinds of people, people from every nation and tongue.

JESUS, HIMSELF, IS OUR JUSTICE

All justice is wrapped up in Jesus. Will cheated on his wife and lived in unrestrained sin, caring nothing for God and only about social judgment of other people. If Will repents and trusts in Him, Jesus will bear the full heat of what he has earned in his sin and rebellion. Jesus's atonement was not cheap. It was extremely costly. But even if Will does not repent, then he will bear this all on himself in Jesus's judgment. That is also sobering.

This applies to Diane in at least two important ways. First, regardless of what Will does, she can trust in a God who does not let the sins against her slide. The offenses against her are taken more seriously than even she herself could manage. Second, Diane herself also needs Jesus to die in her place, and this serves as a reminder to her of the severity of her own sins toward God and her need of Jesus's wrath-appeasing and heart-purifying blood on her own behalf. In all of this, she has a compassionate refuge to cry out to who is right in the middle of the mess with her. God cries with her and comforts her with Jesus's rescue that gives her riches beyond compare: full reconciliation with Himself, guaranteed forever. Only what Jesus gives Diane at the cross will truly overwhelm her suffering. Other supposed cures that play for her attention are likely to actually distance her from the God she needs.

Diane can trust in a God who does not let the sins against her slide. God takes them more seriously than even she does.

AN UNEXPECTED ALLEGORY

This terrible situation can be a visible picture for Diane to come to Jesus in repentance and thanksgiving, seeing a notion of what she did to Him and the incredible grace He poured out freely for her. This can actually serve to further lift God's mercy and grace in her eyes and satisfy her all the more in Jesus's love for her. Please know that I am by no means saying that she and her husband are the same or that his sins were not weightier against her. Clearly, she is a victim. I am saying that even in this extreme, all justice is *still* in God's hands to execute. He draws her to trust His wisdom, His nature, and His power. This is not a shallow or quick process. It is a daily, deep relenting in trust to a wise and active God in the middle of tears and difficulty. Yet it is also in the here-and-now presence of a compassionate and faithful High Priest.

HAS GOD LEFT ME?

GOD STILL CARES, EVEN WHEN I AM THE CULPRIT

I want to shift now to suffering we experience during and due to our own sin¹. Let's consider Will for a while. It is all too easy to see how he was terribly sinful, and in this we can

find ourselves blinded to the reality that in his sin he also *suffers*. Being real about suffering doesn't excuse sin because we do not sin *because* we suffer. We sin because of our own indwelling evil desires. We sin *and* we suffer. This allows us to see the suffering of the sinful and the sin of the suffering. No matter how sinful, we cannot pretend that Will does not also suffer deeply. Admitting this is not unloving to Diane because there is no excusing involved. The guilt of sin, even during suffering, remains on Will until Jesus rescues him and leads him to repent.

God really does care that Will has wounds of feeling like he doesn't really belong in the world of men². For sure, Will's wounds did not make him use sex to feel closeness with other men at the cost of distrusting and dethroning God. His *sinful desires* are what pushed past God in order to get what they wanted more than God. Yet, even in his grievous sin, God cares deeply for Will and the difficulties he faces.

If God didn't have compassion on really sinful people, then how is it that He died for us while we were *still sinning*? Why else did He hear Israel and rescue them from Egypt even though they were worshiping Egypt's idols and defaming Him? God's rescue not only forgives, but it revives and heals as well. Were Will to repent and trust in Jesus, his suffering would not necessarily decrease, but God's

grace would overwhelm it, bringing deep joy and rescue. We all know the sense of being unable to escape, of feeling unlovable. Some of us turn inward in self-abasing thoughts. Some of us turn outward in blame, excusing, and rationalizing. All of these, though, are *godless* attempts to take control of the pain and manage it. They are inherently distrustful toward God or disregarding of His existence altogether. We need to fix our eyes on Jesus and His powerful, changing grace.

*If God didn't have
compassion on really sinful
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still sinning?*

CHRIST DIED FOR THE UGLY

Has God left me? Is there any redemption left for me? Make no mistake, the ugly are no further beyond God's grasp than the "manageable." You can dress sin up and put perfume on it, but it is still rotting flesh. Diane's bitterness will rot her heart just as quickly as Will's lusts rot his. Looking good doesn't make your sin less disgusting, and looking disgusting doesn't put you at a disadvantage. God's power isn't intimidated. His grace is more than able to snatch us from our sinful desires and rescue us, no matter what those desires are or how they show up in life. I love the thought: "Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace...and your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace."³ The thoughts that we have just gone too far, that we cannot be redeemed now⁴, or that nobody will ever forgive or trust us at this point are so potent and trapping. We need to know the God who speaks to these thoughts, who reorients them, and pours out grace to overwhelm them.

YOU MAY NOT GET EARTHLY RECONCILIATION

The truth is that we may never regain trust and forgiveness from people. It also may be a wise choice for Diane to leave Will in the face of his infidelity. This is a choice allowed by

Jesus, though certainly many marriages have been powerfully rescued by grace. Even in areas outside of marriage, such as friendship and family, reconciliation still takes both parties coming together. This is not a guarantee or promise of scripture, and I want the hopes you have to be ones you really can bank on. If our goals and hopes rest in people, this reality will crush us. God's call is to repent from respecting and seeking from people so intensely and to turn our respect and hopes primarily to His view of us. If we trust Jesus and are in Jesus, then we are valued with Jesus as a true child of the Father's public and unrestrained affection. This overwhelms rejection and destruction in the horizontal.

A GOSPEL THAT REFORMS AND HEALS

One of the most potent sufferings that attaches directly to sin is the thought that no redemption, reconciliation, or hope remains for us. God's call to Will is one that powerfully addresses both sin and distrust during difficulty. In Jesus's rescue, Will has power to bear under the worldly consequences of his sin and repent openly toward those he's hurt. This is because Jesus's sacrifice not only immediately calls him "not guilty," but it also calls him "beloved son" and gives him the Holy Spirit to bring power for trust and obedience.

Will has sinfully taken intimacy with other men into his own hands, distrusting at the very least (1) that God alone is enough for his deep satisfaction, (2) that God alone is worthy of his deepest worship, and (3) that God's clear roles for people of the same gender to be intimate in a "knit souls"⁵ fashion rather than a "one flesh"⁶ fashion really is *good for us*. Will distrusts God first, and in that distrust, he then disobeys. What he doesn't realize is that in repenting for these sins and trusting God, the deepest joy he's ever known also awaits him.

BRINGING THE STORY CLOSER TO HOME

This story might seem remote to you, but the reality is that we're talking about common human struggles. The following questions might help bring things closer to home:

- Do *you* trust God when it seems contrary to everything you feel and understand?
- Do you really want God Himself more than *anything* else?
- Do you require Him to explain Himself before you're willing to trust Him and obey?
- Must you first understand everything fully and approve before you will lay your life in His hands?

KNOWING THE GOD WHO HEALS

Will needs to see and trust God as a Shepherd who cares deeply, as a Brother who sacrifices mortally, as a Father who embraces unashamedly, as a Healer who cleanses fully, and as a Groom who embraces intimately. We must know God intimately first, and only then can we trust God's commands and promises in areas where we cannot understand

*We must know God
intimately first, and only then
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and promises where we do
not understand.*

what God is doing or why. We cannot require God to explain Himself to us before we are willing to trust Him. That is *distrust*, not unlike Adam and Eve who were not satisfied with God's view of things but wanted to determine for themselves what is right and wrong, apart from God. Everything we do in redemption rests on God's character, every last bit of it. We need to get to know Him well.

WILL WE ACCUSE GOD?

Am I unlovable? It feels innocent to think this, but in reality, it accuses God of not being able to do whatever He wants. If God wishes to place His love on us, then He will. Jesus dealt with all sin for all who trust Him swiftly on the cross. We need to see that His love is anchored solely in *His* good nature and not in something we earn. It is a costly, sacrificial love that came to us powerfully in light of the fact that we deserved the polar opposite. This is an incredibly freeing reality because being loved no longer rests in our goodness, our actions, our circumstances, our social acceptance, or anything else of ours. It is according to the riches of *His* mercy that *He* poured out in Jesus, in *His* wisdom, by *His* power, for *His* good pleasure, and to the praise of *His* glorious grace (Ephesians 1). It is centered on *Him*, a faithful and trustworthy God, so that we never have to wonder if we will lose it. If I hold myself unlovable, then I accuse God. I cannot call it anything else. My hope must rest on Him and behold Him as He really is in humility, confidence, and joy.

NO UNFULFILLED LONGINGS

Will is not doomed to a shamed, alienated, guilt-ridden, or joyless life. He is not doomed to unfulfilled longings either. In fact, the longings themselves are what God is in the business of fundamentally changing for *all* of us. The grievous nature of Will's sins is not a roadblock to God's grace, or Jesus is accused of being powerless in His sacrifice. Saved by Jesus, Will is never again labeled as "gay" (or "ex-gay" for that matter). His identity ignores and belittles sin altogether, and he becomes "God's beloved son," a new creation entirely. He will doubtlessly enter many times of pain and deep struggle as we all do. But these make him perfect for God's grace, which is powerful in our weakness. The deep emptiness is perfect for God's present joys. This is the story for *all* of us.

HOW ABOUT YOUR OWN STORY?

Is your story more or less alienated than Will's story? Do you also brood godlessly in your thoughts that you are beyond hope? Do you disbelieve and distrust the depth and reach of God's power, holding yourself as more profound than God's ability to save? If you are God's, then He has not left you! If you do not know whether you are His or not, look at your life. Do you see fruit of genuine trust anywhere in your life? Let those signs of grace encourage you, and run to Him in trust, knowing He does not leave His people.

Do you see only distrust in your life? Let that push you *toward* Jesus and not away from Him. The gospel comes to relatively few in this world, and you are hearing it now. It's a bigger grace than you know. So take that as the amazing grace it is. Repent today, now, looking to Jesus's free grace and great power. It requires no cleaning up on your part at all. Look to Jesus's

act of love on the cross. Trust Him. Enjoy Him. Trust a Rescuer who meets you squarely in your sin, takes all of your sin on Himself, and works powerful, real, messy change in you to snatch you from sinful desires and plant you in Godward longings.

You are not beyond reconciliation. You are not beyond redemption. Your hope must rest in *Jesus's* faithfulness as He died in your place. The call for you now is to repent and trust Him. Jesus died for many dirty sinners like me in a shockingly undeserved grace. He is able.

- How do you tend to approach God during trials and suffering? How do you view Him?
- How did Diane's story strike you, and how do you relate to her? How has another's sin deeply impacted you?
- How does God's justice impact you? Does it surprise you? What about Jesus's role in justice? In your own words, how does Jesus take vindication out of your hands?
- How did Will's story strike you, and how do you relate to him? How has your sin deeply impacted someone else?
- How does God's faithfulness impact you? Does He surprise you? Do you see hopelessness as an accusation against God? In your own words, how does Jesus take self-justification out of your hands?
- Where do you require God to explain Himself before you will trust Him and rest in Him? Where does pain and difficulty degrade God's character for you?

IS GOD PUNISHING ME?

Doesn't this question pack a punch? This thought lives deep within our culture. *If things are tough, then I must be doing something wrong, and God must be punishing me.* The word "punishment" can have different meanings to different people, but let's take it to mean justice exercised against us for the wrongs we have done. In this meaning, God absolutely does not punish His people.

GOD PUNISHED JESUS INSTEAD OF HIS PEOPLE

For this, a good remedy is to meditate on the *extent* to which Jesus atoned for the heavy weight of sin we earned. We need to believe God's Word that Jesus really did receive directly on Himself every drop of anger God could ever have toward us. To break even one point of the law is to break the entire law (James 2:10). So if Jesus died only for *some* of our sin, then what was accomplished by His death? Every scraping of wrath we've earned or will earn in our sin was completely absorbed by Jesus: yes, past, present, and future. Even more than this, God does not see us morally "neutral." We aren't "clean slates." Much better than that, we are treated as if we had lived *Jesus's* life. We are treated as if we had obeyed God perfectly since the beginning of

In Jesus, God is not angry at you. He is not saying "I told you so." He is not standing aloof waiting to see if you stand or fall.

time, fully on board with Him, and unwaveringly delighting in Him. We are loved that deeply.

What does this mean for God's stance, intentions, and demeanor toward you while you're suffering? It means everything in the world! In Jesus, God is *not* angry at you. He is *not* laughing. He is *not* mocking. He is *not* saying "I told you so." He is *not* standing aloof waiting to see if you stand or fall. He is *not* paying you back. Whatever God may be doing, His stance toward you is love. God would be morally wrong to punish you now because He would be punishing you for something you cannot be held to account for. But God is not capable of being morally wrong, not because some outside thing holds Him accountable, but because He defines morality. He is the very definition of right. You can trust this promise because His very existence stands or falls on it.

DISCIPLINE OF A LOVING FATHER

From Hebrews 12, we see that God's discipline can and will be harsh at times, but we also see that His stance, His intention, and His goal are entirely loving at all times. Like children, we will not see the end result of His discipline toward us and how it is overwhelmingly for our good. So we trust in the Father who does know. In fact, we are told to be encouraged by discipline because it means we are true sons and daughters and not illegitimate. Also, we will be disciplined regardless of our obedience or disobedience, though certainly also to correct sin in our lives. Your suffering does not necessarily come directly as a result of one particular sin. Rather discipline (1) calls us to repent; (2) reveals what we trust in; and (3) refines our trust in Jesus. It is precisely because of God's *stance* toward us in our suffering that we are called to count our suffering as joy. There is no other way we could possibly do that.

You *are* "Christ in you." Your identity is new. You are a new creation in Jesus. The two of you are joined and cannot be separated. If God cannot do it to Jesus, He cannot do it to you. Likewise, if He did it to Jesus, He *will* do it to you in love with grace to bring you through and accomplish the purpose He ordained for it. The call for you is to rest in trust in a God who is for you and not against you. This lands squarely on Jesus's atonement for you and what that means for your daily life. Meditating on the extent of Jesus's atonement will loosen the shackles of the false-prosperity gospel that says, "If only I had not done X, God would not have done Y." We learn to say, "God, I don't know how You will work this for your glory and my good, but I trust You, and I need You near to me!"

DOES GOD SEE? DOES HE CARE?

God, where were you? How could you sit by and let this happen to me? It's scary to ask these questions. It's also dishonest to ignore them. We need to sit down in the full weight of these questions and get our hands muddy like the Psalmists. God's character is at stake here. There are so many nuances tied into the answers, nuances that are loaded with life-giving or life-destroying implications. In giving the answer the dignity it deserves, we also need to be mindful of what God has and has not revealed to us. We must be ready to rest in His character regardless of how much we end up understanding. Only the gospel of the cross can bind our deep wounds, and to drift from it and lose focus is to miss our cure.

In asking this question, we have quite a few other questions tied into it. *God, do you care? Are you even able to help? If you do care, and you are able to help, then are you good?* We need our hearts and minds to really *take in* the pictures scripture paints for us. We need to *behold* the God the lifted up. We need to *relate* to the vivid examples with our own struggles. In this, we encounter a God far different than we expected, and it changes us powerfully.

HONESTY BEFORE GOD

The Psalmist of Psalm 73 is in great despair at the seeming distance of God and the unchecked flourishing of the wicked. He even says, "All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence." Is that honest enough for you? Are you that honest with God about how you feel, or do you clean up your words? Did you know you could be honest with God? Notice that the Psalmist does not hide behind an attempt at appearing unaffected. He does not say what is not true but pours his heart out honestly at what appears to be unchecked belittling of God's name and destruction of the innocent. We don't need to cover for God. We can ask Him direct, ugly, shaking questions and also trust Him at the same time. The very act of coming to *Him* with the questions implies that we trust where the answer resides.

We don't need to cover for God. We can ask Him direct, ugly, shaking questions and also trust Him at the same time.

THE SANCTUARY: WHERE WE COME TO KNOW GOD

After this honesty, the Psalmist says: "But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end." The Psalmist could have simply said, "Oh, and then it just dawned on me," but he makes a point to say that he went into the *sanctuary of God*. His cure came only after he entered God's presence and was refreshed by Him. He asked an honest question, but this was redeemed honesty that doesn't babble on and on in grumbling and distrust. This honesty trusted God, knew it would find its answer in God, and it sought God out in His sanctuary. Only Godward honesty can be true honesty, or else it turns into an inward bleeding of our sinful distrust, which is no more helpful than our hiding was. We need to encounter God.

The "sanctuary" is where God's presence is, and traditionally it was an extremely fearful place, revered and kept holy because God is holy. People even died from taking God's holiness lightly. But, we see in Hebrews 4, 9, and 10 that Jesus Christ has fully and finally settled any question of whether we are fit to be in God's presence. Jesus goes before us as the perfect sacrifice, and His blood on our behalf is all the holiness we need to enjoy a perfect God. We enter God's sanctuary with confidence, finding mercy and grace when we need it most. The value of this promise to us cannot be exaggerated! Let's not take for granted this incredible luxury and privilege purchased for us at high cost by Jesus. To dabble outside God's sanctuary in inward thoughts is to treat Jesus's cross flippantly as if it could be taken or left at our leisure. No, we must approach God boldly and often, or we belittle Jesus.

In the sanctuary, we discern who God is, what He's like, and what He's doing. We see and taste Him. His promises take on power and produce real fruit in our hearts and desires. We experience healing and restoration that is not so much intellectual as it is relational. We don't

just know *that* God controls and ordains all things. We actually come to know the *God* who controls and ordains all things. We don't just know *that* God loves us deeply and intimately. We come to know the *God* who loves us deeply and intimately. Do you see the difference? God's presence is accessible to us all of the time because the Holy Spirit lives within us, making us walking temples that house God's presence. Intimate and worshipful prayer, along with the Spirit breathing scripture to life as we read it, is never outside our grasp.

GOD DOES CARE, HE NEVER LEFT

Psalms 139 was written for those of us who bravely ask, "God, do you see? Do you care?" This Psalm shows the nature of God in such detail that I'm not sure we could really probe its impact in a lifetime. How true the Psalmist is in saying, "such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it." The Psalms have a way of expressing God's promises in the middle of such dire and extreme circumstances that we can never wonder, "Does this *still* apply to me?" There is no situation, no matter how intense, that at any time can render even one of God's promises or attributes false or powerless to any extent. Should I make my bed in the pit of death, covered in complete darkness, "even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me." No, friend, you are not out of His sight or reach.

This Psalm was meant for this question. God, before time, knew we would need this, and He shows us that He was never absent, that He intimately cares, that He was and is and will always actively uphold us by His hand through any trial. It's important to see from Psalm 139 and all scripture how God never denies the difficulty of the circumstances or that they even happen at all. Why bother saying that God's hand holds me even in the middle of a vast, tumultuous ocean unless there are indeed times when I am in a vast, tumultuous ocean? Right smack in the middle of our worst circumstances, God never leaves us. He *is* there holding us. Did your abuse feel like the pit of death? He is there with you. No, He absolutely has not left you.

A HIGH PRIEST WHO UNDERSTANDS

In particular, there is something we need to get to know about Jesus: He knows suffering to an extent that we do not. What's most amazing about this, though, is that He doesn't use this to mock us.

He uses it to walk all the more compassionately with us, understanding even more than we do the terrible things our suffering inflicts on us. To think that Jesus has suffered more than you might be very hard to grasp, especially for those of you who have suffered repeated abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, murder in the family, or heavy persecution. It seems detached to think that Jesus really understands those things.

Jesus knows our suffering to an extent that even we do not.

So I beg you to start thinking deeply about what the Father meant to Jesus, how they and the Holy Spirit lived together inseparably and in perfect love from eternity past. Think about the depth of that relationship and then Jesus's loneliness on Earth, not being with the Father as He was before He was born in an animal's feeding trough. Think about Jesus's isolation from friends and family, how He was mocked His whole life, how He didn't really have a home during His ministry, and how every last friend left Him at the cross. Think about the

abuse of the cross. Even the Father turned His face from Jesus at the cross, which was surely the pinnacle of Jesus's suffering. Your closest friends may not fully understand your suffering, but I know that Jesus does.

A typical person who had been through what Jesus went through would look at others and say things like, "Look at what I went through! Your suffering is nothing by comparison, so deal with it." But Jesus is no mere human. God is no person you've ever met. He baffles you with His patience and intimacy when another person might mock you. Jesus doesn't use how much He suffered to tell you to buck up. He uses it to let you know that He tenderly understands precisely what you're going through, that He's going through it with you, and that you are by no means alone! He assures you that the Father has an unforeseeable and good plan to make sure your suffering does *not* go in vain but is used so powerfully to make Himself more known for your good and the good of all He rescues.

Friend, you have such an approachable, understanding Rescuer who knows your pain. How wonderful a grace it is for you to get to know Him, to walk *with* Him during the pain, and to find in the midst of that pain the same joy Jesus knew: a Father so beautiful that He overwhelms even our deepest suffering.

IS GOD ABLE TO HELP?

As we ask this, our greatest help is to let scripture answer. As we saw in chapter 3, Job, knowing suffering and the fog of uncertainty better than most, declares about God: "But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind" (Job 23:13-14). God says in Isaiah 46: "I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it."

As we let scripture sculpt God for us, we see that His hands are tied only by His own will. Not only can God do what He wants, He also *cares* so much that He does not rejoice when his enemies die (Ezekiel 18:23, 33:11). We find in scripture that God is in control of everything and that He has deep compassion for the suffering of mankind. So, if God really does see, if He really is with us, and if He really can do anything, then is He actually *good*?

For sure, I am tempted to avoid these kinds of questions, but these are real questions that we all ask. Suffering has a unique way of bringing them out, and God's character is our greatest help during suffering. So to ignore these questions is to remain ill equipped in our striving to know and trust God.

- Where has the thought that God must be punishing you festered in your mind and heart? What does that thought say about Jesus's sacrifice?
- How does Jesus being brutally punished on your behalf change things? Do you see accusing God of punishing you as devaluing Jesus's sacrifice? How does it feel to know God cannot punish you?

- Where do you envision in your heart that God has abandoned you in your suffering? What does Psalm 139 mean to you? How does seeing how Christ truly understands your pain impact you?
- Does the grace of Jesus's cross overwhelm the fright and tumult of suffering?

IS GOD GOOD?

How can God be in control of all things, care deeply for us, and long for the wicked to repent; and yet the wicked do not repent, and the righteous do suffer? There is a lot of mystery in this answer. The best answer is to go with what we do know and then rest in a God who indeed *is* perfectly good, wise, and in control. Don't turn your mind off by any means, but admit humility where it is due, and gear your intellect toward what God does reveal. Our resting point cannot be in understanding every detail of *how* our suffering works for our good and His glory. Our resting point must be to trust the *One* who powerfully and wisely works all things, including the suffering He has ordained for us, for the good of all who love Him. How can this all be true?

WHAT DO I KNOW? HOW DO I KNOW IT?

The heady among us (and that includes most of us) need to relent from our pride and ask ourselves what we really *know*. In the innumerable complexities of reality, seen and unseen, we only "know" something so far as we believe⁷ it. For sure, logic should not contradict⁸, but all logic starts with believing *something*. Belief and worldview are as close to truly knowing as there is in life, and they set the foundation for how we process life. We all start with something. Are we primarily biological entities converting energy from one form to another? Is reality defined by a set of cosmic rules, which are constant? Or are we primarily relational beings intended to know a real God intimately? Is reality defined and sustained by a *person* who is reliable and faithful rather than an impersonal set of rules?

We can act proud about our assumptions, we can repeat them often and loudly, and we can use fancy, intimidating language to pretend our beliefs are something more substantial than assumption. But assumption is assumption. If what we believe turns out to be wrong, then everything based on that

*Our human nature ventures
to establish by the counsel of
our will what is true.*

is in jeopardy as well. Also, just because we perceive that our beliefs are consistent with reality doesn't necessarily mean that they are true. Either our perception could be wrong, or we've constructed a model that fits what we do see but doesn't fit what we don't see. We need to admit the humbling reality that we really do not have the capacity to strictly *know* what reality truly is. Certainly, we do not know *everything*. We believe, and we progress from there.

Our human nature ventures to establish by the counsel of *our* will what is true about reality while God declares that He established the universe and sustains it perpetually by the counsel of *His* will and the might of *His* hand. Will you trust yourself or the God of scripture? Will you accuse God, believing that you do know better, or will you trust another's say on the matter? Does truth answer to you, or is it given externally from one greater than us who knows better than we do? Ultimately, the only way we, as rescued people, believe the gospel to any

extent is as the Spirit convinces us by powerful, undeserved revelation of who God is. Salvation comes to real clarity when we ask: who will I trust? Myself, or the biblical God? The lost consider God to be absurd, and they trust only themselves or that which they approve. This reveals that they are lost. The saved relent to God and trust Him, even where they do not fully understand. This is the Holy Spirit's work. It reveals that they are rescued!

HUMILITY: RESTING IN A WISE GOD'S ARMS

The heady among us must relent in our pride at God's response to Job in Job 38-41. Though this was a harsh word to Job, it worked overwhelmingly for his good and God's glory (those two cannot be separated for believers). Will we trust that God really *is* good and that we simply don't know everything that's going on in the universe? While pinning a child down to get an injection, the child probably thinks you're torturing her and doing something bad to her. But you know reality better than that, and you know that it is love. How are we any different if God really is as wise as scripture says He is? Will we trust Him? Will we rest in Him?

GOD'S UNFORSEEN GRACE TO JOB

Job's response is that he repents and falls on God in trust that He really is wise and powerful. God rewards this by setting Job up as a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ as Job is allowed to intercede for his friends, who sinned against God in their evil interpretations of Job's suffering. God gives Job such an incredible honor of showing the role of Jesus long, long before He came to live as a man to die for the sins of the world. God accepted Jesus's prayer on behalf of disobedient sinners like me. Jesus, a better Job who actually obeyed perfectly, pleads more potently on behalf of more and needier sinners to accomplish a deeper forgiveness of a more profound debt.

This is the ultimate end of Job's suffering, to foreshadow the better suffering servant, who was truly faithful to the end so that He could intercede for helpless, sinful people like you and me. God was good in Job's suffering, not merely because He repaid Job for all his losses in this world (which He did). God was good because He gave Job the honor of pointing us to the One who will forever reinterpret our suffering through His own suffering and victory.

The point is: Yes, God is entirely good in your suffering, even if you do not know how it works out in the moment. Job could never have known during his lifetime, even after talking with the God of the universe Himself, the vast significance of his life as it pointed to Jesus, who would suffer and intercede not for His friends but for His enemies. Through Job, God displayed Himself powerfully. The intimacy of what Jesus's suffering means as He walks with us will never lose its power in our own suffering. Consider, for a moment, the darkest moment in history: The Father turns away from Jesus with disgust as He becomes our curse and absorbs the wrath we've earned in our sin. He worked that moment for good, for Jesus's good, for His own glory, and for our overwhelming good. If He can do that with the ugliest suffering in history, it gives us a reason to trust Him in the middle of our own. We don't have to see *how* he works our suffering for good. We've already seen Him do it with worse.

God is entirely good, and He is compassionate and powerful. We can see how Job's story turned out for a good he probably never really knew. We can rest in the God who worked Job's and Jesus's unbelievable suffering toward an unbelievably good end. We can trust Him, though Psalm 46 literally be our cry, though the very ground beneath us should crumble and fall. We all feel this way sometimes: as though we were a buoy in an ocean, untethered and crashing anonymously from wave to wave in a tumultuous storm. This is why we need God, as we enter into His sanctuary, to reinterpret our struggles and show us the truth of His might, plan, and intimate love for us.

We can rest in the God who worked Job's and Jesus's unbelievable suffering toward an unbelievably good end.

THE END OF SUFFERING

"The end of suffering" is a double meaning. There is an end, a purpose, that God intends for the suffering He ordains. It also so happens that in this destination, suffering comes to an end! Suffering ends when Jesus comes again. In 1 Peter 1, Peter tells us that we should spring up with joy so profound that we can't express it at the thought of Jesus being unveiled at long last. Our greatest suffering is that He is not yet with us face to face. He really is that worthy of our longing. Our most powerful help during suffering is to gaze all the more intently on our greatest hope: Jesus Christ at last, face to face, in a quickly fading memory, and full satisfaction with God's intimacy. This is *the* best grace for us as we suffer. This is how we suffer well.

- Does heaven overwhelm your sorrow?
- Do you regularly dwell on what heaven really means and what it really is?
- Do you regularly fantasize over the reality of heaven and long for it?

WE NEED GOD IN OUR SUFFERING

For good reason, suffering evokes in us reactions of pity, desperation, and the longing for a return to normal. We find ourselves without things that seemingly any decent human existence should include. Perhaps security was taken away, or dignity, companionship, food, comfort, understanding, or our bearings altogether. It is no wonder that our first thoughts are to regain what was lost, to regain some semblance of normal. Suffering brings to the surface what we feel we cannot exist without. You have very good reasons to feel exposed, bitter, and alone. Your only hope is an equally real yet more powerful reason to know that you are indeed not exposed, forsaken, or alone. You need a real God to enter into your real troubles.

Suffering surfaces what we feel we cannot live without, and it exposes what we hold as more valuable than God. In suffering, we think we most need to be given what we lost, but God shows us that what we seek *more than* Him will actually kill us. He shows us His unexpected nature. As the Spirit awakens our hearts, we trust Him and run to Him. In this trusting, we realize that in our suffering, He gives us something that overwhelms and overshadows it all: Himself. We need God most in our suffering.

WE NEED GOD IN OUR SUCCESS

Riches are a trial and should be a form of suffering for the righteous. The rich are under a burden of difficult temptation. The desires for money, security, reputation, respect, and a great many other things will be amplified during success and often exposed during the suffering of loss. Also, we can be rich in far more things than money, such as knowledge, entitlement, popularity, respect, and pity. My question is this: Do you perceive that you are suffering? I'm not trying to pull a Debbie Downer here. Times of ease are great, and refreshment is a needed grace that God does give us. Still, our greatest suffering is not being with God face-to-face. Do you long for heaven? Or would heaven interrupt your plans? If we are not groaning for Jesus to finally be unveiled, we have certainly been calloused by sin's deceitfulness.

If you feel like life is coasting and there is no suffering going on, then I want to challenge you to enter the sanctuary of God and ask Him where you may not be obeying Him. You need to see things more clearly: particularly your state, your need, grace to come, and grace given now. Suffering is a firm promise of scripture. Times of refreshing are great, but prolonged seasons without the heart perceiving any difficulty is likely a sign that God is not what we long for most. It may be a sign that we have failed in the trial of feeling temporarily satisfied by life giving us what we wanted in our sinfully elevated worldly desires. The call of scripture is to see your need and then to see the God who rescues.

SUFFERING, TRUSTING, AND RESTING

The reality, though some bright and flowery words are used here for who God is, is that suffering is very painful, cloudy, and pressing. In my own temptation, my own lack, and my own pressing, my heart to this day tends to long for felt needs more than God Himself as a first reaction. The pain and discomfort is so repulsive to my flesh that I frequently have to repent and once again enter into the God's presence. That's exactly why frequent, in-the-moment repentance is the stuff of redemption. It interrupts our flesh and then embarrasses it with a flood of the Spirit's power to enjoy God above all things once again. Meditate on God and enjoy His deep grace during deep suffering. Interrupt the addictive anger, pity, depression, and vindication by casting your eyes off of your trial and onto God's character. Repent, focus on Him, enjoy Him first, and then watch how He calms your heart, puts you back in the Spirit, and brings unexpected joy. It's ugly, but it is not wrong to hurt. It is not wrong to suffer. Enter the embrace of Jesus as He suffers with and for you, as He understands and embraces you with guiltlessness, intimacy, and friendship. The picture from scripture is this: "Leave to thy God to order and provide."⁹

- How does seeing God's unchecked power and control over all things in the universe meet your questions of whether He is able to help you?
- Where does it feel uncomfortable and alienating that He is able to help and yet you still experience suffering? Where does anger at Him well up?
- How did "Humility: resting in a wise God's arms" impact you? How do God's character and power meet you in your feelings of alienation?

- How do you view heaven? How do you view Jesus's return? Do scripture's descriptions of heaven surprise you? Does heaven elate you? Does it comfort you?
- Did it surprise you to think of success as a form of trial and burden? Does your desperation for God fail in times of ease? How does this reshape your view of suffering?

ACTION

There are three things to focus on doing this week:

1. Read through Psalm 139, Psalm 10, Psalm 73, Psalm 46, Romans 8:31-39, and Psalm 56 (a passage each day). Keep practicing what you learned from Chapter 2, and really cry out to God in desperation, thanks, repentance, and enjoyment as you read through these scriptures. As with last week, let these scriptures speak to your day-to-day storms as you endure them in real ways with a real God.
2. Identify someone trustworthy in your community group that you can begin getting deeper and more real with about your struggles with sin and suffering. Approach them this week, and begin deepening that relationship. Yes, it may be awkward, but awkwardness is not a sin. Caring more about your reputation than God's wise commands, though, is damaging, and He has lovingly commanded us to live in close community.
3. Beg God to make this person softhearted. Pray for their heart, that God would prepare them to walk this out with you and that He would prepare them to join you in confronting sin, beholding Him, praying, and striving. Pray earnestly for them that God would give them joy and infatuation with Himself above all things, that they too would continue to change with you. They need your prayer as much as you need theirs.

¹ This is not the same as innocent suffering. Still, God's wrath toward His own people is entirely emptied on Christ. His stance is still fully loving. Even as discipline comes harshly, often through suffering, its goal is redemptive to us.

² I'm not claiming all homosexual men feel this way. But it is quite common for that struggle, and it was for this man as well.

³ The Discipline of Grace by Jerry Bridges

⁴ You may wonder about blasphemy of the Holy Spirit or passages in Hebrews about sinning after being enlightened. You really can know that you're saved. Recount the gospel. Do you long for that rescue? Does God Himself lure you? Do you long for sin to be put down and no longer separate you from God? These are signs of grace to encourage you about His salvation. Now get to the daily work of beholding, trusting, and obeying Him.

⁵ This phrase comes from 1 Samuel 18:1, describing the incredibly deep bond of friendship between David and Jonathan. It intends friendship and sibling intimacy.

⁶ This phrase is reserved biblically to mean sexual intimacy.

⁷ Belief and assumption are the same as far as logic is concerned. It is that which has nothing outside of circular reinforcement to further undergird it logically. I use "belief" as a synonym for "assumption" because it's a word that tends to make more sense conversationally.

⁸ Contradiction is easy to spot in human-defined realms like mathematics. But claiming contradiction in a reality we did not define shouldn't be treated so lightly. Is it possible that something we do not see might explain what we hold as contradiction? We should be humble about it.

⁹ "Be Still My Soul", Katharina von Schlegel, 1752.

CHAPTER 5: IDOLS, WORSHIP, AND ADDICTION

WAYWARD MOTIVATIONS

An idol is something we desire and pursue to our own destruction. It always seems to parrot some of God's promises, but it is powerless to deliver. Like fools on a gold rush we pursue idols, drunk with a nugget that was planted there and digging our whole lives to realize there's nothing to be found. It's no wonder that idols also happen to be the building blocks of addiction. It's inexplicable how we run after idols. Empty and abused, instead of waking up to the reality that we've been duped, we just run all the harder after them. In idolatry, in addiction, we become blind, calloused, deaf, and lame. Seeing what idolatry and addiction do to us, there's something about teaching on idols that tends to catch our ears. But I fear that we're apt to focus more on idols than we do on the God they mimic.

I fear that we're apt to focus more on idols than we do on the God they mimic.

When talking about idols, a lot of us tend to feel this drive to learn more and more information. Something about this topic in particular really seems to get people going. When sermons talk about idols, we feel like suddenly they're meaty whereas something on the trinity or the tax collector crying for mercy might feel thin. I want to probe the reasons we do this before we get into idols. The goal here is not to cease striving but to move toward biblical motivations. If anything, trusting God more fully should probably *increase* our striving though it will look different.

SELF-RESCUE / SELF-RELIANCE

God alone rescues, not information about God, not information about idols. We all tend to take a self-reliant approach to idolatry and to God. If I can learn more information about the idol, then I can break its power. My hope lies in facts and education. I want to be in control. I don't want to be needy or dependent. I can "figure" my way out of the hold this idol has on me. But where is God in the picture? Is He a God who helped me get back on my feet so I can handle things now? Or is He a God who rescued me out of helpless ruin and is still my only rescuer? Do I seek to be rid of my neediness and reliance on God? Or am I willing to endure continuing difficulty and strong pull of idols, turning again and again to God as a needy (yet confident) beggar?

God alone rescues, not information about God, not information about idols.

Often, I used to press into God in times of word and prayer with the expectation that later, I wouldn't desire idols or feel their tug. So, when that inevitable tug pulled on my heart, I felt like I had failed during my time with God. What I didn't realize, though, was that God's presence and power to embarrass sin are *always* available to me. As the Israelites could not stockpile manna, I cannot stockpile Godly desires as if I could cut off my need for God's direct provision later. Godly desires are available to me this moment and the next. I don't have to be

intimidated by the strong pull of idols because a stronger longing for God lives within me everywhere I go. It's OK for me to remain utterly dependent on God's grace because it is constantly supplied to me. He doesn't run out. I can count on Him to remain. Far better than rescuing myself, I enjoy Jesus's continuing rescue that doesn't forsake me.

EASE

Do you want to disarm the idol's pull on your heart so that things become easier? Do you want to work hard now in order to coast later? Consider God's people, rescued from Egypt, being led through a wilderness of harsh suffering. The difficulty of the wilderness fixes our dependence and longings onto God Himself. Life may not get easier once you learn more about idols, but you will certainly find power as you get to know God! Expect difficulty, and even more so, expect a present God to walk with you through it. Knowledge about idols will not disarm the desires by which they pull you this way and that. But knowing God will generate stronger new desires that overpower the pull of idols. You cannot fight an idol except by the real, here-and-now presence of the real God. And that presence generally lives in difficulty, not in ease.

THE ANSWERS WITHIN

Are you looking for answers within yourself, your past, or the idol itself? This is no source of help for you at all. How can I say that so confidently? Because Psalm 115 is quite clear that idols cannot speak, hear, see, or touch. They cannot do anything at all. So what should you expect when you tilt your ear toward them? You should expect more smoke and mirrors.

Idols pull me by my own sinful desires. If I had no sinful desires, idols would be powerless. Shaking a cup that is supposed to hold water, do we blame the shaking when vinegar spills out instead of water? The real problem is that the cup was full of vinegar. The shaking just revealed it. Discovering an idol and the desire by which it draws me is just that: a discovery. It neither cures nor explains. If I have an eating disorder because my parents and peers constantly insulted my body image, then my cure is to only be around people who will validate me. And when my circumstances fail me, so will the supposed "cure." But if my eating disorder is me reaching past God to take acceptance into my own hands, then my cure is to die to that desire by trusting Jesus's atonement on my behalf. My cure is an inexpressible worth given to me freely by Jesus, a worth I couldn't earn and cannot lose! No matter the circumstance, the true cure never fails me.

Discovering idols and desires must be done with your eyes *on Jesus*, begging Him for help, telling Him your troubles, recalling who He is, and obeying Him. He supplies the Spirit: the diagnosis and the cure together. We need *God's* perspective, not introspective searching. On our own, we conjure up self-focused, self-excusing, or self-rescuing diagnoses and cures. We stay stuck in the realm of godless cures that can do no more than change our circumstances, avoid triggers, and say arbitrary positive things to ourselves. We're stuck dancing around our problems rather than finding a cure. Our eyes do not need to spend

*Our eyes do not need to
spend another second looking
at our idols. We disregard
them, and we behold God.*

another second looking at our idols, ourselves, or the storms bearing down on us. We disregard all of those, and we behold God. We forsake seeking from all of those, and we seek from God.

PROMISE MATCHING

This is the hardest one for me to write because this is something we really should do. But it shouldn't be for wrong reasons. Here is how this goes. I look at the tangled web of desires that strike a chord in me to find what seems to empower my idol's pull, asking God to reveal things. As I find these desires, I go to scripture with the help of community to find promises, commands, and attributes of God that speak to these desires. Again, this is wonderful and powerful, and we'll get into this. But there are some traps I want you to be prepared for.

GOD IS A PERSON

God is a real, living person, and we walk with Him in relationship. It is important to remember that these are promises and attributes of a real, living person, not an idea. I know that sounds obvious, but I think we all fail to remember this at times. I know I do, so let me be the first to confess my own difficulties with this. We do not memorize a verse in order to rehearse it at need and convince ourselves that it's truer than the idol. We memorize a verse in order to come as awed worshippers to the Person it is about, enjoy His presence, cry out to Him for help, and join brothers and sisters in enjoying Him. We have a strong propensity to turn our hopes to facts about God and stop short of the God Himself. We're so apt to stay outside His sanctuary, wading in inward thoughts.

SIN IS A RELATIONAL PROBLEM

Think about what it's really like when the full rage of that idolatrous desire is pulling on you. I think it's fair to say that our tidy little logical minds go quite *insane*. In anger, I start imagining scenarios to be angry about, and I talk to myself in a mock argument. In lust, I long for and do things that in any other state of mind are repulsive. In fear, I distrust peoples' motivations and imagine suspicious scenarios of how they intend ill toward me in secret. In the middle of our sins, we are *not* logical. There probably is ultimately no *good* reason why we fall headlong after sin except, "I just *want* it." Our thoughts are chaotic and untethered, spiraling into areas they don't normally go, not that normal is the goal. This is not the time for a *logical* exercise, as if we would even make sense of our sin anyway. The sooner we realize we cannot make logical sense of sin, the better. No one will ever be able to tell you *why* you want to sin, and even if you did find out why, it wouldn't cure you. Sin is a relational disease. It has a relational cure. This is a time to cry out to a real Person, not "try to figure things out." That's a trick sin uses to keep your eyes away from Jesus. The only thing with power in these times will be your Rescuer Himself.

*Sin is a relational disease.
It has a relational cure.*

TUNNEL VISION

There are *many* lusts, though we may feel burned by only one or a few. Idolatry, and even fighting idolatry, acts to create "tunnel vision." It is dangerous to focus only on the promises and attributes of God that seem most appropriate *to us* to kill the lusts at hand. Are

we smarter than God, and can we define what topics scripture should focus on? Or will we let scripture lead us in what we focus on? God alone kills idols by His power, and we must trust *Him* to do His job. His command to us is to trust and obey Him in all things in the everyday of life. This means we don't avoid things that seem unrelated to our dominant struggles at hand. There is great mystery in God's soothing of the wind and waves, and we should trust simply. We obey Him because we trust Him, and we leave to Him the act of rescuing our hearts. By all means, find things about God that really speak to those few desires that really wreck you. But also be careful not to fixate *only* on those.

WE HAVE MANY DESIRES

What is behind my desire for this big, glaring sin? This is a very helpful question to ask because by doing this, we can uncover other desires at play within our hearts. For instance, if I'm addicted to sex, it could be that desires for affirmation, escape, or importance are just as strong as my desire for pleasure. Knowing this gives me more things I can look for in God to overwhelm my desires for sin. This is often called "the sin behind the sin," and it's a great thing to think through. We should try to find as many sinful desires as we can so that we can recognize them as they seize control and repent from them.

That being said, it's helpful to know what this process is and what it is not. When we look for other desires at play within our hearts, we're finding exactly that: *other* desires. We are not discovering explanations and reasons for why we desire things. My desire for sex may be driven largely by my desire to be affirmed as a man. But why do I desire to be affirmed, and why does that desire reach past God instead of trusting Him? It's not explained by rejection in my past because Jesus was perpetually rejected, and yet He trusted the Father more than He desired affirmation. Indeed, He seeks His affirmation from His Father above all and gladly accepts exactly what the Father gives Him. At the deepest level, I'm either walking with the Spirit to engage His desires or I'm walking under sin to engage sinful desires. We're merely discovering other desires, often stronger desires. But still, they are simply other desires, not reasons.

This relaxes the anxiety of feeling like we have to find the "deepest" desire or we'll never change. That's kind of thinking has no root in the Bible or in reality, and it's a trap so many of us fall for. In large part, it's just another of sin's tricks to keep our eyes away from God and place them on ourselves, to keep our hopes away of God and place them in ourselves. There is no magic discovery of a "deepest" desire that will fundamentally change how we fight sin and pursue Jesus. We put our eyes on God, ask Him for help in exposing our hearts, and gaze on Him to cure what we find. This is hard work, but we rest from anxious toil because He guarantees our rescue.

GODWARD DETAIL

Avoid fuzzy, general notions of God. Think about how intricate your thoughts, desires, and plans are when it comes to idols. Think about how long, how often, and how vividly you fantasize about idols. It's detailed isn't it? It isn't fuzzy. We should be all the more vivid and frequent in our fantasies of God! Knowing that sexual fantasy takes opportunity through loneliness; that "fear of man" isolation and shame take opportunity through rejection; that

laziness takes opportunity through anxiety; that anger takes opportunity through feeling out of control -- knowing these types of things is so helpful. But we must remember that rescue is still God's solo work, and we do not have to understand *how* everything is working in order to be more than conquerors. In the midst of insanity, our path out is primarily *relational* and not logical. It is no less detailed, but it is relational detail as we engage and enjoy God.

God Himself destroys the sinful desires by which idols control us, not facts about Him, not facts about idols.

WHAT IS IDOLATRY?

IMAGES: THE BAIT AND SWITCH

An idol is literally an "image" or a "likeness" of something else. It looks like God to some extent, but it is no more than a hologram that flashes out at the last second as we reach through it. As Ecclesiastes puts it, we grasp for the wind and attempt to feast on it. Jeremiah 2 shows us that idols are leaky, cracked containers that can't hold water for long and always end up empty, unable to provide for us. Psalm 115 likens idols to statues crafted by human hands, which have mouths that don't speak, eyes that don't see, ears that don't hear, noses that don't smell, hands that don't handle, and feet that don't walk. They look similar to God in some aspects, they make similar promises that sound kind of like God's, and they even mimic some things that God provides for us: companionship, intimacy, value, purpose, safety, affection, etc.

IDOLATRY IS ABOUT GOD'S GLORY

The difference is this: they are *not God*. They are cheap imitations seeking to take His place. Like fish bait, idols take on the appearance of something we long for. Many times, in fact, the objects of our longings are not in and of themselves "bad." Not entirely anyway. But an idol shows itself when we desire it more than God and when

our plans forsake God's commands. We define what is good and distrust God's provision. We define the means and distrust God's commands. We refuse lack and distrust God's wise withholding. The whole thing centers on God Himself. Idols are not God. They compete with Him and seek to steal our hearts away from Him.

We're tempted to think that the picture centers on our needs, at least as we perceive them. But consider the word, need, in a slightly different form: necessary. "I need this" is transformed into "This is necessary," and this begs the question: "Necessary for *what*?" Needs are clever disguises for desires stretching out for a goal. What is your desire? What is your goal? Scripture contends that the only desires and goals that breathe life into us rather than strangle us are to know and enjoy God as fully as possible. The picture doesn't center on our needs. It centers on a God who knows our true needs, whose glory is foremost at stake, and whose display also means our deepest satisfaction.

God exists for His own good pleasure, and He created us out of His own abundance. This means that the pinnacle purpose of His existence is not directly to satisfy us. It is to display

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Himself. I'm weary of *stopping at* "idols don't satisfy" because it stops short of landing on God's magnificence: what we should desire most and what will actually satisfy us most. It stops short of what is most helpful. We need to land on God's glory. God is primarily in the business of displaying Himself, the greatest treasure of the universe, out of whose overflow spilled the entire universe. He knows this is our greatest good, so He will not bow to our desires as they stand. He gives us Himself, and idols are simply not Him.

A huge part of God's glory is just how openly gracious He is to His people. We receive His grace as we place our eyes squarely on Him, requesting but not demanding, submitting to what He shows us as our needs, and resting in the means He chooses to provide for us. He gives manna, and we do not demand meat. He holds out on water for a time, and we ask confidently for water without accusing Him of intending evil or being too weak to act. He leads an army to pin us against an impassable river, and we wait and behold His power, knowing that nothing can separate us from His love or render any one of His promises void at any time. Everything stands or falls solely on God's character and power.

Merely saying "idols don't satisfy" stops short of God's glory: what we should desire most and what will actually satisfy us most.

GOD REALLY DOES SATISFY MORE

It is absolutely, 100%, true that idols do not satisfy like God does. They fall so short! Scripture does not apologize for calling God a never-ending source of sweet, running water in Jeremiah 2. Psalm 115 doesn't blink an eye at proclaiming that God will be a help and shield to His people, that He will bless them, that He will give them and their children increase. He gives good things! We can shout this from the rooftops. And this should point us to delight foremost in the *One* who gives us good things out of His own goodness. We do not profit most from God's things. We profit from God Himself, and in His free and open-handed grace He does not withhold from us.

God is our hope, and idols are not God. They lie, they lure, and they destroy. He speaks truth, He out-lures, and He raises us to life with Jesus. Change is not only an exercise in asking: "How does God satisfy more than this idol?" It is that, but it's much more. The top question on our minds needs to be: "Who is *God*, and do I trust *Him*?" Knowing and trusting God is still our greatest need, and that need will be more than satisfied!

THOSE WHO TRUST IDOLS BECOME LIKE THEM

Psalm 115 tells us that when we trust in idols, we become like them. This is a real problem that tangibly affects our everyday lives. We like to think that longing for things more than God doesn't do any real damage. We like to think that if things stay in our head, then it's not "that bad." But if Psalm 115 is right, and it is, then cultivating trust in idols by beholding them is neither safe nor harmless. We *change* as we behold and trust in idols, as we long for them in our hearts and in our fantasies. We turn into something as empty, powerless, and deceitful as the idol itself. This effect is real, not abstract. This is an unavoidable warning that Psalm 115, Isaiah 44, and Romans 1 make clear to us.

Isaiah 44 in particular is where I really fall apart and melt, and I hope you do the same. Please put this down and read Isaiah 44. Let it paint pictures in your mind. Let it sit for a little while. Let's look at our state when we trust in and long for idols. The idol is blind, and therefore we are blind. The idol grows weary and fades, and therefore we grow weary and fade. The idol can accomplish nothing useful, and therefore we can accomplish nothing useful. In fact, we were not only blind, but we were blind to our blindness. We did not even realize that we were missing God. We boasted as though we could see clearly.

After this, God shows off who He is to expose the idol for the lie that it is. Isaiah 44 cries out "Remember these things, O Jacob, O Israel!" Psalm 115 cries out "O Israel, trust in the Lord!" The path out of idolatry is: "Remember God and trust!" Isaiah 44 sits and soaks in the work of displaying God's salvation from the clutches of idols: "Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it; shout, O depths of the earth; break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and will be glorified in Israel."

In a very real way, we become just like the things we worship. When we worship God, as the Spirit rescues us and opens our eyes, we change and become like Him. He glorifies Himself and displays Himself in pursuit of His people. We join Him in glorifying Him and displaying Him in pursuit of His people. Our actions have power because they are His works in us. Our thoughts are no longer futile, but our praise and trust last for eternity. Our desires are no longer darkened but perceive God as the Spirit illuminates His nature to our hearts. The Holy Spirit awakens us, exposes sin, displays the true God in greater and greater brilliance, and breathes faith into us. We become like Jesus.

In a very real way, we become just like the things we worship.

- In "Wayward motivations," did any of those strike you in particular? What do they say about your goals? What do they say about your view of God?
- Do you find yourself stopping short of enjoying and dwelling with God as you learn about Him? For you, what does it look like to enjoy God as you learn about Him?
- Idolatry's greatest damage is how it blinds us from seeing and enjoying God. How does that change the way you view idols? How does that change the way you deal with idols?

HOW DOES AN IDOL WORK?

Idols have common ways in which they work. To start, idols lure us by our *own desires* (James 1). The only reason the idol has any power at all is because we desire sinful things with a sinful intensity. This means that the key to disarming the idol is to destroy its ammunition: our own sinful desires. The center of the situation is our desperate captivity to desiring sinful things, and we need our captor to be destroyed. Sinful desires only die as they are choked out by desires for God, and Godward desires grow as we see Him and dwell with Him.

CORNERING

Idols lure us in moments. They isolate us and corner us, trying to make the sale quickly. You'll find that the time of really strong luring is usually not that long in the moment. This is not

to say we can trust in our own strength. It's to demonstrate God's faithfulness to give sufficient grace to bear under the temptations He allows. James 4 shows us this as we are commanded to first *submit* to God, then to *flee* the devil, and then to *draw near* to God. In this, the devil will flee from us, and God will draw near to us. The fishing lure doesn't stay in the same place for long. It moves on when it doesn't accomplish its goal. Realize when you're being trapped by sin. Identify it, flee the lure, and run to God. The Spirit inevitably reveals to us that we're in danger of being cornered by sinful desires. As this happens, run from sin, do not engage in conversation with it, and draw near to God in these moments.

WEARING

Idols wear on us. This is why we cannot strong-arm our way without submitting to God and drawing near to Him. This is why accountability filters and programs are not the only solution to pornography. When we enclose sinful desires with boundaries, those desires

We keep from growing weary by refusing to enclose a sinful heart with mere restrictions. We keep steadfast as we behold our steadfast God.

don't just go away. No, they continue to rot and cause damage in our hearts. We just put a lid on the stench, for a while anyway. Remember that trusting in idols causes us to tangibly change from the inside out. Dwelling on idols, being lazy in the "small times," leads to a wearing effect. You cannot resist on your own for long! The only solution is to kill the sinful desires *themselves* and destroy the source of luring. As quaint as it sounds, we kill sinful desires by trusting and obeying God in everyday life. Don't underestimate God's power as we live under Him in simple trust and simple obedience. We keep from growing weary by refusing to enclose a sinful heart with mere restrictions. We keep steadfast as we behold our steadfast God with awe and submit and draw near to Him in the everyday, watching Him destroy Pharaoh's army for us.

TAUNTING

Idols taunt us and tell us that we cannot hold out for long. Even when we do not relent quickly in the moment, we tend to feel that we cannot keep enduring through these storms. A good cure for this is to realize that God is a sure refuge and to remember just what a refuge is (Psalm 46). No artillery can damage His walls, and no lure can weaken His defenses. We have a safe place. So we need to steer clear of godlessness! Seriously, you're in real danger when God is not actively in your thoughts and desires. Because He does not fade or change, we can belittle and ignore the idol's taunts. We have confidence in a real Person, a confidence that grows. Our refuge is not intimidated by these tactics, and we don't need to be either. Move your eyes to your refuge, believer, and stop respecting the idol altogether. Belittle it.

ACCUSING GOD

Idols accuse God of being different than He is and distort His real promises. They accuse Him of not providing, of not caring, of being aloof from us, of being quick to anger, of having a love that is not enduring, and of not keeping His promises. In their attempt to dethrone God by

our own desires, they use our twisted thoughts to change God into someone different than His word says He is. We often take Him to be more like ourselves, in fact. The Israelites, making their golden calf, began to worship it and thank it for rescuing them from Egypt. By attributing God's rescue to the idol, they inherently gave in to accusing God of *not* rescuing them. To them, He was no longer the good God who bore them intimately on His wings to bring them to Himself, their greatest pleasure. In their blindness, they considered Him to be absent altogether. We will do the same without Jesus's rescue through hearing the gospel with faith. Again, this lands on a plea to avoid godlessness! You fight idols by walking with your God.

*Idols accuse God of being
different than He is and
distort His real promises.*

TRAPPING

Finally, idols lure us into a trap. I mean this not only in the moment, but I mean it on a larger scale as well. In the moment, they promise cheap satisfaction that doesn't cost us that much. Taking our eyes, our hopes, and our desires away from the Creator they were meant to feast on, the idol is building a trap. It's true that men and women who struggle with pornography become helpless slaves of pornography who are unable to escape. It's true that men and women who give into fits of rage get to a point of addiction to the high of that rage, to the rush of power over others, and to the elation of temporary control. But the slavery goes deeper still. The trap is utterly inescapable. We need external rescue, or we're completely hosed. Yet this rescue is a strong rescue that is not intimidated by ingrained patterns or addiction. We think we're investing very little in our cheap little indulgences to idols. But we don't realize that our moment-to-moment worship actually *changes us*. Praise God for Jesus who doesn't leave us like our idols but rips us out of captivity and makes us like Himself!

AN EXAMPLE FROM OVERINDULGING TELEVISION

A man comes home from work. Yet another day, the boss is not only demanding but lazy, a wreck of leadership, provoking every employee around him to anger on a constant basis. At home, the kids are just unruly, and today the house is a mess. He feels anger toward his wife and detachment toward his kids. As a deacon in his church, he knows he hasn't met with half the people he was supposed to help shepherd this week. He feels like a failure. He said some nasty things to his wife the night before, and she's avoiding him because of his tendency toward anger. Numb, foggy, angry, and self-hating, he plants in front of the TV and watches 6 hours of sports. In this, he knows there are things he should probably do otherwise. But in a confusing, contradicting world of self-accusation, sorrow, desire to get up, and condemnation for staying, he doesn't move for hours on end. Come 2am, barely awake and unable to think hardly at all at this point, he falls asleep, depressed and anxious with unmet responsibility, wishing he had not wasted the time and wondering if this will ever change.

Honestly, a lot of behaviors could drop in here, changing almost nothing else: excessive drinking, abuse of prescription drugs, fits of rage, pornography and masturbation, detachment and leaving the house, affairs, or overindulging in food. "Escape" rings true for most of us.

"Loneliness" defines our brave new world. How can this man, how can you and I, ever hope to make sense of this mess? How can we address such a large monster of sin? How can we *change*? A lot of this will be broken down in more detail later. But for now, let's ask questions like: What is pretending to be God? What is it promising? What things do I deeply want? Where is my desire possibly twisted by sin? What does God's word say I need? Who is God really, and how is He different from the idol? Will I repent and trust Him?

Place yourself in this situation. Substitute it with a painting of your own. Are you feeling like God is distant, but the TV fills the silence? Is the TV promising "I will be with you" while God is standing off to the side, judging and cold? Does the TV promise "I will comfort you" while God is only out to prod you and provoke you? Are your fantasies of being the star promising "I will make you worth something" while God calls you a nobody?

There are usually three primary fronts of attack from idols.

1. Idols lie about who God really is.
2. Idols claim to be more like the real God than they actually are.
3. Idols prey on our sinful desires that long for a god who neither is nor should be.

- In "How does an idol work?" which of those jumped out to you? Describe what that looks like in a typical temptation you face. How does this shape the way you deal with idols?
- What does your own "overindulgence in TV" look like? What does your idol promise you? How does it distort who God is? What promises or attributes of God do you fail to trust, engage, and enjoy?

HOW DOES GOD DEAL WITH IDOLS?

GOD REORIENTS

This section represents a hard lesson in my own life. It felt somewhat alienating at first, but I'm growing to see how wise God is and to treasure Him all the more in this. When thinking about how God satisfies, it's best to realize that God is actually *killing* all of the desires we had for idols, and He is *giving* us new desires that trust Him foremost. God doesn't "repurpose" idolatrous desires. We tend to think that the desire itself is usually fine, and that we just went to an idol for it instead of God. And I completely see why we say that because what the idol promises usually does mimic something God promises. But idols also *twist* our desires in ways we can't always see. God may not fulfill *that* desire exactly as it stands because it is likely poisoned with sin. God kills it, period. And then He gives us brand *new* desires.

For instance, I desired self-esteem in my flesh through the idol of success in my workplace. Well, what God gives me is incredible value beyond comprehension as He joins me with Jesus. But this isn't *really* what my flesh desired, and this is evident in a couple of places. First, in the Spirit, it is Jesus who is esteemed first and foremost, and my value is tied to Him. In my flesh, though, I certainly didn't want to enjoy someone else being praised the most, and I didn't want my value to be dependent on another. Second, I didn't earn this esteem at all.

Quite the contrary, having become like my idol, I had truly made myself worthless. All of my worth through Jesus came *unearned* in an act of pure mercy. My flesh despises this because it wants to cling to the pride of earning what it gets.

Do you see how my fleshly desires for self-esteem are actually very far off from my new desires that Jesus be lifted up over everything? They look similar because each promises me value. Yet at their core, the idolatrous desire and Godward desire are worlds apart. They hate each other. God is in the business of reorienting our very core desires by killing the old ones. Then, He satisfies our new desires utterly, and we are by no means left wanting. Remember that He is an open-handed, giving God!

So God is not the drop-in replacement for our idols. God came first, He wired us, and He created us. Idols are the cheap substitutes claiming to be drop-in replacements for God. We don't look to our idols first and then say that God's role is to do what the idols promised. We ditch and ignore the idols altogether like the holograms they really are. With them out of the way, we look to God alone, beholding and enjoying what He knows we need and loves to give us. God does not just say, "You are a star." He doesn't just say, "I'm going to make life comfortable for you." He doesn't just say: "I'm going to be your buddy." This is a lying picture of who God really is, a picture painted by our lying idols.

God is not the drop-in replacement for idols.

God crafts a rich narrative that says something closer to, "I sent my Son to die for you because your heart was so desperately sick, you needed a costly cure. Put your eyes on Me, and see how much worth I love to give you because I see you like my own Son. I rejoice over you openly without shame like I do over Jesus. Jesus is the most important person in all creation, and you are wrapped up in Him. He is your greatest pleasure. Do not take my rich love toward you through my commands, promises, warnings, and nature lightly because the cure was more costly than you know. You were so far gone that Jesus had to be crushed. But He was crushed fully, and He fully atoned for you. I will send a lot of trials your way because I do this to refine all of my people, using steadfastness to shake you all of your false hopes and to better show my superiority to your idols. In these trials, I will never leave you, and I will be your constant refuge to cry out to. I will be present with you so intimately. I will satisfy you like you never imagined. So empty your hands of what you think you bring to the table, and eat for free what I give in grace. I have a home ready for you that is greater than anything you could possibly imagine. Fix your eyes on Me. You can trust Me."

He untwists the twisted desires. He resets our orientation by setting us into His own storyline with new meanings for what we've done and what has been done to us. He moves our eyes to Him and away from ourselves. He defines our truest, deepest needs and the goals they bow to. And He satisfies them not just adequately but with complete abandon like an unashamed lover. He will lead us into some difficult and challenging times in order to expose and kill evil desires and give new Godward desires to conquer them. He is not a drop-in replacement for idols. He is a living, breathing Person who redefines, reorients, revives, and satisfies in a wholly different way.

God is a living, breathing Person who redefines, reorients, revives, and satisfies in a wholly different way.

GOD IS HOLY AND DIFFERENT

When scripture says that God is Holy, it means that He is *different* from us. For sure, we exhibit Him to some extent, being made in His image, though marred by sin. But He is not like us. Where we excuse because of our failures, He is angry for justice more than any of us. Where we are quick to anger in our offenses, He is remarkably slow to anger, given how much greater the offenses are against Himself. Where we proclaim love in bold gestures and fizzle out within days, months, and years, His love chose us before the world was made and remained steadfast through all of our hatred and disregarding. Where we move and bend, He has not changed in His entire existence. Where we desire comfort, He risks uprooting and pain to love us invasively. In short, this God is like no person we have met before.

This also means that He will satisfy us in very different ways than our idols satisfy us. Did your idol infuse you with shots of adrenaline, control, and vindication in your anger? Did it address your cold loneliness and boredom in mere seconds with promises of "I will be with you" through pornography? Did it shoot through your veins the elation of glorying in the body of another, a drunken surge of pride and self-importance? Did it immediately numb the pain with tingles of temporary relief from the depths of cold depression through substances? Does it promise you people will notice you with your skinnier body and that you won't feel so left out, so overlooked?

*God will satisfy us in
very different ways than
our idols satisfy us.*

Envision the God who rescued Israel from Egypt and led them through the wilderness for a while. He shows compassion. He demonstrates power. He remains faithful to all His promises. He speaks tenderly to Israel, proclaiming how He bore them on eagle's wings out of Egypt and brought them to Himself. As He stands on the mountain in the wilderness of Sinai, He calls them to come up to Him on the third day after demonstrating His power in a fearful scene of thunder and cloud and trumpets blasting. But Israel considers Him foreign, and they do not trust. They don't *know* Him, even though He has revealed His nature to them as loving and benevolent for them. So Israel stubbornly takes their stand at the foot of that mountain, refusing to come up. Because of their distrust, their fear drove them further from God instead of closer to Him.

God is also calling us to come up His mountain away from our idols. We will react the exact same way as Israel if not for Jesus, who obeyed where we could not. In Jesus, we can *know* this God who calls us up to Himself. Our fear draws us near¹. God will seem foreign at times, and His ways of satisfying will seem distant. That is a normal temptation. But *hear* what this God says to you: His tender promise to bear you on eagle's wings out of bitter captivity to sin, to bring you to Himself, to make you His, and to stay with you. He is guiding us as sojourners through a tough wilderness to show us His reliable and generous provision in any situation and to isolate our eyes on Him before we finally come home to be with Him forever.

God's ways are slower and deeper than idols. He does not give a man with same-sex attractions the quick companionship of another man's body and romantic interest. God first gives this man the deep, sweet satisfaction of His own companionship and intimacy. Then, by His own hand, God also gives him brothers to cultivate deep, intimate friendships that display Him even more clearly. God does not give a woman who struggles with her image the quick

satisfaction of vomit-induced thinness. He shows her the immeasurable worth she has in the Christ who pours out grace on the shamed, becomes shame on their behalf, and embraces His bride unashamed. He does not give a pastor who struggles with anger a quick vindication. He shows him how Jesus advocates for his sins and liberally forgives an immeasurable debt and then goes further to a full and intimate reconciliation. He shows justice in its ugliest and most beautiful form as Jesus dies for helpless sinners. God calls the pastor to look on Jesus, to trust His justice, to relent his anger to God's own handling, and to serve gladly from the heart.

These forms of satisfaction are foreign to us, and they are new. We will be tempted to think that God cannot satisfy, but we are supplied with the Spirit who gives us Jesus's loves and longings. We are given power to trust where trust would be otherwise impossible. The new journey in the wilderness will reap satisfaction that goes far beyond momentary jolts of adrenaline. In great lack, we are given unbelievable pleasure. The wilderness deprives us of

In great lack, we are given unbelievable pleasure. God might be foreign, but He is an exhilarating pleasure in the middle of being uprooted.

access to our prior enjoyments to show us the true enjoyment. We get the God of the universe *Himself*. He might be foreign, but He is an exhilarating and deep pleasure in the middle of being completely uprooted. My words are simply failing me as I try to describe how beautiful this picture is of God's people actually trusting Him in this wilderness, enjoying His intimate presence, delighting in His provision, and praising Him with complete abandon.

- In "God reorients," did this change how you envision God as He confronts your idolatry? How does it change how you engage God when you're feeling empty from resisting idolatry?
- How does "God is holy and different" speak to the disillusionments you've felt with God's new provision for you in Jesus being so different than you're used to?

ADDICTIONS: GOD GAVE US UP

Addiction has a pattern to it: promise, lure, planning, acting out, let down, and self-hatred. But these are really only symptoms of a deeper disease, a disease defined being distant from God.

ABSENT FROM GOD

In Romans 1, we did not thank or honor God. He became absent from our thoughts, our desires, and our endeavors. In this, we see our first judgment: (1) we became futile in our thinking, (2) our hearts were darkened, and (3) we became fools so foolish that we boast as if we were wise. God alone is the source of eternal purpose. So, severed from Him, our thoughts amount to nothing: they are "futile." God alone is the relational light of intimacy, shown by the Trinity of mutual glorifying, submitting, and enjoying. So, severed from Him, our hearts are darkened (literally "eclipsed") from Him, and our relationships break. Wisdom begins in fearing God, whose unknowable depths of knowledge fruitfully burst forth in powerful words that

formed the entire universe. So, severed from Him, we become fools, again demonstrating that we amount to nothing: a vanishing vapor with no substance. Divorced from His wisdom, we cannot even achieve the realization that we are fools because we have no wise one left to expose us.

Our condition is entirely caused by *absence* from God. Addiction is all about the glory of God, mainly its absence. But the problem goes further: we exchanged His truth for lies and worshiped creation. Eclipsed from God, our fixation moves to creation, and God tells us several things that result from this.

GIVEN OVER

God gave us up in our evil desires to impurity. The phrase "gave us up" means that He delivered us over as helpless captives to be ruled by impurity, unable to escape. This is the one and only source of addiction, and everything we see in addiction flows out of this. Apart from Jesus, we are *all* addicts. I know those last two sentences are very broad, sweeping statements. I know how farfetched they might sound, and I don't write them lightly. I firmly believe them to be true. We are severed from God, and we are given over as slaves to impurity. In ourselves, there is no getting out of this, no escape. Why does an addict feel he or she can never change? Because he or she truly *cannot* by any means of their own. Why do we all feel trapped in endless, vain striving without hope? Because as it stands without Jesus, we really are. The "stuck-ness" of addiction roots itself in being given over by God as captives to sin. He gave us what we strove for: everything but Him. We need rescue.

God justly gave us over as helpless captives to be ruled by impurity. This is the one and only source of addiction.

MARRED INTIMACY

God gave us over to sexual immorality. This is not saying that sexual immorality is on a worse level than the other sins in Romans 1, but it is a sin Paul handpicked to show us something about our idolatry. Our idolatry is a broken intimacy. Severed from the only source of true intimacy, we grasp for a broken intimacy, often a flash of pride and stealing from another that we term as "sex." This impurity is not the sex God has ordained for the married, and it's not just because people are having sex outside of marriage. Even in marriage, we can live out a broken intimacy through pride and taking, a mockery of God's pure intimacy, which is the joy of giving, submitting, honoring, and enjoying that we see in the Trinity. Sex might be the most marred thing in society today. It is meant to point to God.

Severed from the only source of true intimacy, we grasp for a broken intimacy, often a flash of pride and stealing from another that we term as "sex."

Even outside of sex, though, our idolatry plagues us with broken intimacy. We exchanged God, the triune light of harmony, for other people. Fearing and respecting what others think of us more than we care about God's thoughts toward us, we cannot love others as we were created to love them. We constantly grasp and strive for value from others, angry

when we get the opposite, and unable to love those who don't love us. In comfort, pride, and contentions, we stiff-arm closeness with God and others as an inconvenience.

SELF-FIXATION

God gave us up to homosexuality. Paul cannot be picking on homosexuals here because Romans 2 shows us that we share this worship exchange in common. Also, in the flow of Paul's argument, this is not yet the apex. It's a waypoint on the path to a larger climax in his argument. The various sins of Romans 1 are different fruits off the same tree, and Paul handpicks sexual immorality and homosexuality to tell us things about our shared worship disorder. Paul is showing us that the pinnacle idol we worship is *self*. Our worship moved from God to that which is more like us: creation. Then it moved to humans, who are much more like ourselves. Finally, it moves to those of the same gender, those who share our image, those who are much, much more like ourselves. The target is *self*. The target is *my image*. I love my image so much in my pride that I worship it everywhere I see it, even if not romantically or sexually.

*The target of idolatry
and addiction is self.*

It doesn't just have to be sex, but think about how our thoughts, whether by puffing ourselves up or putting ourselves down, always seem to revolve around self. Our goals center on what will benefit ourselves. Our desires grasp for comfort, ease, and pleasure for ourselves. We fixate forever on our reputation, how we're viewed. Idolatry centers on self.

BROKENNESS

Paul also uses homosexuality to make a second point: our idolatrous state is *unnatural*². Under sin, we are simply not as God intended us to be. This broken intimacy is all wrong, and we are far from what God intended us to be. This is why we long in fantasy and stories for a world wholly different. Even calloused and blind under sin, I think we still instinctively know that something is just not right. God intended humanity to live close to Him, to enjoy fellowship with Him, to *know* Him. Idolatry has wrecked us, and we chose it. We need a Rescuer to undo the damage and remake us as God originally intended. This renewal is exactly what Jesus came to do. Jesus is restoring God's glory to the center of His peoples' lives and hearts.

IDOL SHOPPING

Before Jesus saved us, we were *all* addicts. We were all helpless captives to worshipping creation, fixated on ourselves, suffering shattered intimacy, and living in a broken state. Even now, we can still walk in the same sinful desires and brokenness. We may not all do drugs, have fits of rage, watch pornography, or lust for a better car. We do all have a drug, however. Do you struggle with endless anxiety over your performance at work? Does failure crush you? Do you detach from relationships as soon as someone hurts you or loses your trust or respect? Did you become abstinent from alcohol or sexual addiction, but you still long freely for it in your imaginations? Do you crumble when rebuked and puff up when praised? Would you still feel valued outside of your position at work or church?

While under sin, we can change somewhat, at least from a worldly point of view. But outside of Jesus's rescue, we can only move from one idol to another, *still* separated from God. We try on the idol that looks best on us. When one is viewed shamefully in society, when it is out of style, we move to another that looks better on us. We choose perhaps what

It does no good to forsake idols unless we run to God.

looks more dignified to those around us. For instance, instead of wallowing in self-pity in my addiction to prescription painkillers, I might get clean, fixate on sobriety, get an education, and make something of myself. The real question is, "Who is glorified, and where are my desires targeted?" For sure, this takes on a different flavor for each of us, but without Jesus saving us, our desires are trapped and cannot see or enjoy God. It does no good to forsake idols unless we run to God. The big sting of idolatry is how it blinds us to the God we were made for.

THE GOSPEL FOR ADDICTS: THE GOSPEL FOR YOU AND ME

Real gospel change is not just a game of worshiping opposites. Because I desire sin in my flesh, the last thing I'm going to do or want to do while walking in the flesh is worship God. I'm trapped precisely because I don't *want* God. Perhaps I want to get God in order to fit in or to be viewed

To want God solely to get God and not to get something else is a supernatural change.

better by others. But then what I really want is reputation, not God. To want God solely to get God and not to get something else is a supernatural change. Something has to change in my core desires for real gospel change to take hold in me. My desires changing is a monumental task, one I cannot accomplish myself. It's honestly confusing to think how my desires can possibly change, especially since I don't really even want them to change while I'm walking in sin. We'll go there a lot more in the next few chapters. But for now, we need someone outside to come in and snatch us out of those desires and to give us new desires that long for God. Jesus accomplished this for us on the cross. In our everyday lives, this rescue looks like trust and obedience.

Changing the heart's desires is in *God's* domain, but what it looks like on the ground level for us is that we hear the gospel and trust God. In the trust, we obey God gladly. This hearing and believing is what carries us along in Galatians 3. By hearing the gospel and trusting the God it exalts, over and over again, God is perfecting the work He started in us. Our task is to behold Him often, to trust Him often, to repent often, and to obey often. We keep our eyes ever fixed on Jesus as we run to Him. This is our path out of idolatry, how we experience renewed worship and intimacy with God. Our path out of idolatry and addiction is faith and repentance in the everyday, running to God often.

Consider the gospel as displayed by Paul to the church at Ephesus:

"I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come." (Ephesians 1:16-21)

In beholding this display of God, the blindness of our eyes and darkness of our hearts are powerfully undone as God gives us His Spirit who makes the gospel come alive to us. The gospel peels off the scales from our eyes.

We are commanded to set our minds to the God's display in the gospel (Romans 8:5). We are commanded to long for the One displayed (Galatians 5:5, Romans 8:23). We are commanded to obey in our faith and practice our faith so that what we behold is not unfruitful (Romans 1:5, James 2, 2 Peter 1). We are told that faith comes by hearing the gospel and that we hear the gospel as it is sent and preached to us from the Word (Romans 10:14-17).

Jesus's defeat of sin and death on behalf of all who trust Him is absolute, immediate, and forever. You are not "addict," any longer. You are not "ex-[insert your idol here]" either. You are "beloved son or daughter of the prodigal Father," "bride wrapped with intimate embrace by the Groom," "servant provided for by the good Master," and "sheep of the protective and familiar Shepherd." Addiction has no power over you. It has been put down. As we behold God, trust Him, and repent, we belittle our idols because we become so infatuated with who God is, longing to be nearer and more intimate with Him. The mere fact that idols eclipse us from God should be enough to fuel a strong hatred for them because of our longing to know God more.

When God rescued Israel from Egypt by a lamb's blood, He didn't just release them from Egypt's captivity. The destination of His rescue was to bring them *to Himself*. Through Israel's rejection of God, He shows us that a better Lamb and greater Rescue was needed, or we too would reject Him outright. We need the grace that envelops us now in Jesus Christ. God bringing us *from sin's captivity and to Himself* is a single motion, a single act, and a single rescue. Addiction has no other cure, and it also has no other destination. Freedom from sin and captivation with God are one and the same.

Addiction has no other cure, and it also has no other destination.

Freedom from sin and captivation with God are one and the same.

ONLY ONE CURE

I think the single most unnatural and difficult part of overcoming idolatry in the moment is *ripping our eyes, minds, and hearts off of the idol altogether*. But we must do this! The

temptation is to keep looking at the idol in inward thoughts and to try to figure out why we long for it so much. The idol will use any trick it can to hold our attention at all costs. Make a practice of asking, “Where are my eyes right now?” Anything that keeps our eyes off of God is a smoke and mirrors trick to keep us in captivity. Don’t fall for these ploys. Get your eyes off that memory, that person, that body, that anxiety, that loneliness, that difficulty, that fantasy, that drug, or whatever it may be. Flee to God, and remember Him first! Getting your eyes in the Word will feel detached at first, but you must enter God’s sanctuary, come to Him directly, and recall who He *really* is, undoing the lies about Him. Get to know the only hope you have of killing sinful desires: a real Person who, Himself, is the greatest treasure of the universe. This alone is the idol disarmed. This alone is addiction defeated.

To be a bit more “wheels on the ground,” I’ve found in my own walk that when I’m trapped by sinful desires, usually the very first thing that meets me in that insanity and begins to help pull me out is realizing that I’m being duped, that the idol is not going to give me what I dream it will. It’s so helpful to realize this in the moment. This idol is a fake, even if I only see this truth faintly. Knowing this really helps me snatch my eyes and heart away from the idol in the moment. After that, I immediately run to God, empty-handed, begging, and praying, “God, forgive me for forgetting you, and remind me who you are! Show me where my desires dethrone you. Show me how you satisfy!” I take on the awkward and rough task of getting in the Word, plowing through the feelings of detachment, and begging God for grace to see Him clearly again and recover my enjoyment of Him in His Word. And from there, I chew on who He is, I engage Him, I enjoy Him, and I rest in Him. That’s a picture of in-the-moment rescue for me.

What does your progression out of sin’s insanity look like? These in-the-moment battles might not seem like much, but they are the stuff of redemption.

- How does it strike you to think of everyone as an addict to sin? Does it change how you view idols to see how they hold us in captivity and brokenness? Does it change how you view God to see what He has saved us from?
- Where in your life have you exchanged one idol for another that seems less destructive? What does it look like to run to God instead of the other idol in that situation?
- “Freedom from sin and captivation with God are one and the same.” How does this confront your previous reasons for fighting idols? How does it shape your game plan for fighting idolatry?

ACTION

There are three things to put into action this week. The first is for now, and the last two are throughout the week.

1. Identify one idol that tends to wreak havoc in your daily life. You can fight more later, but it's good to focus on one this week and begin getting the hang of it. It's important to be Godward as you dissect an idol because your answers really do come from God and not from the idol, yourself, or your past. You'll find your times in the Word extremely helpful for this. The questions below can serve as a helpful start as you ask God to help reveal this idol for what it is.

- God, what am I desiring when I engage and trust in this idol?
- God, when and in what situations during my day do I tend to desire this idol the most?
- God, what kinds of things is this idol promising me?
- God, what have you promised me that confronts this idol's false promises?
- God, what kinds of lies is this idol telling me about who You really are?
- God, who are You really? Please remind me who You really are!
- God, how do You satisfy me in ways that embarrass what I want from this idol?
- God, if I trust in You and hate this idol, how does that change my thoughts? How does that change my actions?

2. Act on what God reveals to you to begin putting down this idol throughout your days and nights this week. Knowing when that idol tends to tug on your desires, begin confronting it as you did your storms in Chapter 3 with either aloud or written prayer, with real things about God from the Word, and with real-world action. Live out your game plan in real moments, and fight hard.

3. Approach the friend you talked briefly with, and initiate planning a time with them for each of you to begin getting to know one another better. As you meet together, give them an idea of what you're struggling with. This is an extremely tough thing for many of you to do, so I want to comfort you that God really is right there with you. You can also bring your community group leader into this initiation to help set the stage if you feel too vulnerable. Take the help God's given you, and act in faith.

¹ I stole this phrase from Sean Cordell of Treasuring Christ Church in Raleigh, NC. He used it in a sermon on Exodus that changed me profoundly.

² This is not the bullying pastor who says, "What those people do just isn't right. It's unnatural." The reality is that *you and I* are not right. *We* are unnatural, all of us. Otherwise, Romans 2:1 makes no sense.

CHAPTER 6: ROOTS AND FRUITS

QUESTIONS AND HEADACHES

Why do I do what I do? Why do I want what I want? How do I change? Answering these kinds of questions leaves our heads spinning and our hearts frustrated, and this is for a very good reason. We simply were not wired to live with our eyes gazing inward and constantly self-reflecting. We were wired to gaze on and enjoy the God who made us.

Thankfully, the answers are not so much of a headache for the Christian. What I'm about to say might be the most important thing in this book. If I hear the gospel, and I still want sin, then I haven't *really heard* the gospel! If I hear about the grace of the cross, and I immediately start thinking of the sins I can

If I hear the gospel, and I still want sin, then I haven't really heard the gospel!

“get away with” now, then I have not really *heard* the gospel. If I don't begin to see God as beautiful, trustworthy, awe-inspiring, and worthy of every drop of my worship, then I have not really seen Him. My ears are still somewhat deaf, my eyes still blind, and my heart still calloused. To behold the gospel and hear it with faith is to *change*. It is the gospel that *moves us* from flesh to Spirit. If you find yourself hearing the gospel yet still thinking mostly about sin, the solution is to hear the gospel *again* and to beg God for grace to truly hear it.

This gospel that seems so reckless and irresponsible in freely forgiving our every disobedience against God without us having to do anything is the same gospel that *changes us* into people who now hunger to obey Him. Jesus fulfills the law for us not only in how He obeyed perfectly on our behalf but also in how His cross *changes us* from lawless rebels into people who genuinely love to obey Him. Forgiveness and change are inseparable guarantees. When I find myself longing for sin, what I need most is an eyeful of the real God. When I find my faith failing, my remedy is the beautiful gospel of an invasive, sin-hating God pouring out free grace from a bloody cross of immeasurable sacrifice. Only then do I remember *who He really is*. Only then is my heart inspired to trust Him. Only then do I treasure Him and enjoy what He tells me to do. Only then do I change.

A lot of times, we're confused by the phrase, “Do it in God's strength.” What does that really mean? I think a succinct way to say it is: to do something in God's strength is to do it because you *want* to do it. It presupposes that your very desires have changed! Law changes from something that is restrictive and intimidating into something that we consider freeing and delightful, solely because of the nature of the God who gave it. To *rest* as you work hard means to have a heart that wants what God wants. We join Jesus, whose very *food* was to do the will of His Father. Is *food* arduous? Is *food* oppressive or constraining? We have this heart readily available for us from Jesus, and it takes hold as we hear the gospel with faith. We need to hear the gospel. We need to see God.

This chapter looks at the bird's eye view of change: what needs to be changed and how that happens. The next two chapters come closer to ground level, taking a closer look at what we actually *do* in our trust and obedience.

THE ROOT OF CHANGE

It's common to see analogies using roots, trees, and fruits. There are things that we readily see (fruits), and there are things underneath those that hold the real influence (roots). To pluck the "fruit" solves nothing, and another fruit will just keep growing in its place. Uprooting is where the power is. But, if we do not live and breathe from the Word, these teachings often actually lead us further from the gospel rather than closer to it. The two places we tend to go wrong are (1) what the roots really are and (2) how uprooting happens. To get there, let's start with what the roots of sin and obedience are.

WHY DO I SIN?

This isn't a small question. What we believe about our biggest problem means all the world for what we believe about our cure.

DO I SIN BECAUSE OF UNMET NEEDS?

"Need" is an interesting word. For such a weighty word, it has a fuzzy definition, doesn't it? If I say that I need something, what does that really mean? We all describe needs differently: water, food, shelter, self-worth, relationship, and so on. However we define our needs, one thing is true: whatever we term as a "need" goes unquestioned. We just need it. We think that it cannot be morally wrong any more than "2+2=4." When we think of needs this way, God becomes the villain if He does not fulfill the needs we claim. His role is cast as the one who exists to satisfy them as we perceive them. When we think this way, we tend to think that we sin because we are missing something we need. When that need is met, the sin just fades away. Now, in all fairness, we all act differently in easier circumstances. We really do tend to look better when life is going well. But does this sound like the gospel of Romans 8 that calls us "more than conquerors" in the middle of wild amounts of difficulty?

When I say, "I need X," the reality is that "I need X in order to get Y." There's a goal in mind, something I strongly desire. When I say, "I need this," what I'm really saying is, "I want this really badly!" Needs are clever disguises for strong desires. I want something, and anything I see as necessary to get it, I will call a "need." The problem is that my desires and the means I take to pursue them are not unquestionable. In fact, they are often sinful.

- Is my desire godly, or is it sinful?
- If I follow it to the end conclusion, what am I really seeking?
- Am I reaching for God first and trusting Him to know what is good for me?
- Or am I reaching *past* God in order to grasp something I find better than Him?
- Is God keeping me from something that is good? Is God in my way?

What we'll find is that a lot of times, what we call a need is actually an idolatrous desire. And meeting that desire at it stands may actually be feeding the very idol we are commanded to starve. Is it inherently wrong to want to stay alive, to be mentally healthy, to be productive, to be valuable, or to belong? Certainly not. These are clearly good things. But to reach past

God, distrusting His character and provision, in order to get any of them is deadly. Any desire that longs for something more than it longs for God is a sinful desire. Any means that distrusts God's provision and wisdom is a sinful means.

To reach past God for anything is sinful.

You may be thinking at this point: What about the *real* needs? Forget the soft needs, and let's move on to what we *know* are needs. What about staying alive, food, water, and shelter? Is it wrong to buy food at the grocery store? Hardly. And we're commanded to provide for family and for the helpless. Is it wrong to go to a doctor to be healthy? Not in the slightest. Please do exercise, eat well, and get a checkup. Go vegan or paleo if you wish. But this makes a terrible end goal, despite how innocent it may seem, and I want to show you biblically why this is.

RESHAPING HOW WE THINK OF NEEDS

I'd like to start with something extreme like survival. It shows how even an obvious desire, something we're clearly wired for, can be damaging when we long for it more than we trust God.

TRUSTING GOD MORE THAN SURVIVAL

Consider Daniel 3. Three men are being sentenced to burn alive in a furnace because they refused to bow down and serve an image of another god. Really think about this story and this situation, what it must have been like: the intimidation, the fear, the shame, the doubt, and the isolation. I don't doubt for a second that they questioned their own sanity at times. The pressure must have been immense. Yet, instead of pushing past God and grasping foremost for survival and belonging, these men refused to bow down in the face of certain death and took opportunity through their situation to obey, trust, and display God in an amazing scene of courage. They said,

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 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."

Did you notice that they not only belittled a powerful ruler, but they also belittled death itself? That time, God did save these men, but they were fully willing to forsake survival for God's sake.

In Luke 22, Jesus knowingly walks into a trap laid for him by a friend. He, too, faces certain death and is in agony in the garden, talking with His Father. He was forsaken by His closest friends in His trial and prays desperately, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." Christ, in more severe trial, facing a stronger sentence, having full knowledge that He actually *would* die, is the fulfillment of what the men of Daniel 3 pointed to. He was willing to suffer like no one can fathom because He trusted His Father and refused to reach past Him for anything that promised to be better. Imagine the horror if Jesus had considered survival better than God's plan! Imagine you and me

without any hope at all. Paul says we should be pitied among all people if Jesus were not raised from the dead. But what if He never died! It's a scary thought.

WHEN WE WANT SURVIVAL MORE THAN GOD

Consider another example of the temptation to demand needs in Exodus 16. For context, God just rescued Israel powerfully from the heavily-oppressive hand of Egyptian slave masters. God smites Egypt with miraculous plagues that preferentially targeted Egypt to show that He makes a distinction for His people and that He is more powerful than any god. God also endures Israel's accusations as Pharaoh's army presses against them at the Red Sea and powerfully and miraculously saves them. He speaks and demonstrates His love, compassion, and good will toward them. They complain about bitter water, and He makes it sweet. They complain about food and say, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." They accuse and grumble against God, stretching out past Him for something they consider better: food.

Our natural instinct is to say that this seems quite understandable, and this is because we are no different than Israel in our own human nature. Jesus, in Matthew 4, had gone far longer without any food (forty days and nights continuously), and instead of demanding bread and grasping for it by His own power and means outside of God's will, He says "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." He longs for God alone and nothing that God has not allotted for Him. Imagine the horror if Jesus had disobeyed God, making Himself unfit as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. Imagine our horror at the trinity forever broken, God ceasing to exist as a united trinity of glorifying, honoring, enjoying, sending, and obeying!

There are real and damaging consequences to pitying, protecting, coddling, and excusing any desire that does not first reach for God. We injure the body of Christ with even the idolatry of survival. No idol should ever be safe from being killed in our heart, or these are the kinds of things that result. For sure, we long to survive, we long to be loved and accepted, we long to be identified and claimed, we long for fair weather, and we long to be influential and powerful. These are not evil in and of themselves, but to reach past God for any of them is tragedy in the making. It is not discompassionate or dismissive to be honest about these things, but it is for our incredible good! To let idols remain though is to rot the human heart from the inside out, and that is true suffering. It is compassionate to call out these idols instead of coddling them, to cry out to God as Jesus did, "Nevertheless, your will be done!"

Jesus spent most of His life without much acceptance. He spent many days without shelter. He had very little ease in His life. Yet in His lack, Jesus obeyed wholeheartedly with joy. Seeing Jesus's trustful obedience during lack sheds a brilliant light on our hearts to expose and disarm our would-be excuses. The

The root of sin cannot be unmet needs, or Jesus's life simply doesn't make sense.

root of sin cannot be unmet needs, or Jesus's life simply doesn't make sense! God doesn't meet our idolatrous desires. He kills them. He *replaces* them. He overwhelmingly meets our desires for Himself, and we are deeply satisfied.

We can obey by faith with real joy even in times of lack.

DO I SIN BECAUSE OF MY CIRCUMSTANCES?

"What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness." (Romans 7:7-8)

Romans 7 has the perfect answer to this. Did the law make me sin? As Paul says, of course not! The command against coveting is a perfectly good command, and it is meant for my good. But my sinful desires seized the opportunity to produce all kinds of covetousness. The law merely revealed that I have sinful desires, and it provided an opportunity for them to show up. Sin takes opportunity through any of life's circumstances to produce sinful desires that refuse to trust God and take Him at His word.

Your hometown pigeon-holing, the difficult family situation, your riding job, your friend who stabbed you in the back, your bitter or distant spouse, your unruly children – none of these are the root of your sin. Nor is changing any of these things your cure. No change in your circumstances will reform you in any way. Marriage often further inflames your loneliness. Kids often lead to even more grumbling when it's all said and done. A better job often clamps your heart to your bank account or social status. No matter what the cries of "if only" may be, the Bible guarantees us that as we stand outside of Christ, sin absolutely *will* seize an opportunity through *any* circumstance. The root must be something else.

We can obey by faith with real joy even in extremely tough circumstances.

DO I SIN BECAUSE OF MY WOUNDS?

Focusing on our wounds and their healing is common in our culture. First, it's important to know that God is not dismissive of our wounds by any means. His heart breaks not only for the broken but *with* the broken. We must know this. He is not passive, He is not far off, and His arms are not folded!

If our notions of woundedness center on socially driven images of masculinity, femininity, fatherhood, or belonging, then wholeness is defined by the wrong image and falls very short of God's true nature and glory. When wounds excuse sin or when we consider ourselves to be passive victims of simply not knowing who we are, we terribly underestimate our true condition, our true nature, and our true need for rescue. In our flesh, we actively, purposefully, and perpetually generate sinful desires that hate God. We need a bloody cross that killed that person and raised up a child of God that loves Him!

The greatest wound we have is being severed from God by our sin. In this wound, we are not passive victims of not knowing who we really are but willing participants under sin. We love and spread blindness, not just for ourselves but for others as well. If all I need in order to be whole is to be told who I really am, I circumvent the cross and belittle my need for Jesus's rescue. We need to hear who *Jesus* is, to have our sin

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forgiven by Jesus, and to have our diseased hearts killed with Jesus. We need to be raised as new creatures with Jesus, who prefer the light like Jesus and enjoy an identity given freely by Jesus. Only then will I love the light and hear the gospel with faith. This cure, in one sweep, both binds my wounds and cures my sin.

It is also important to realize that the Christian life is going to be lived with many wounds, most of which will not fully be bound until we meet Jesus face to face. The plaguing feeling of not belonging, the fear of ridicule, the agony of loneliness -- the sting of these things will not completely fade on this side of eternity. For sure, we will have great power over these things, living overwhelmingly joyful and obedient lives. Still, as weak people, we trumpet God's strength. Paul's thorn in the flesh was sent by God and remained until he died. Its purpose was to show God's strength and to keep Paul from pride. Likewise, we will live with wounds not wholly healed in this life, or else we would not still groan for Christ's final return. God's cure for sin does not make us immediately whole. Until the end, we are not yet complete. We fix our hopes on that grace to come. The root of sin is not woundedness. We can obey by faith with joy while wounded.

DO I SIN BECAUSE OF CHEMICAL IMBALANCES AND INGRAINED PATTERNS?

PATTERNS

There is a growing trend for Christian addiction ministries to focus on "pathways carved in the brain" from long repeated habits before we discuss even how we are beings who primarily relate to God. The notion is that sin is merely bad patterns I've learned in my past, and I now need to learn new ones. The notion is that I am basically a machine with patterns: some to be unlearned, others to be learned. But ask yourself: Does this match up at all with the biblical description of what it is to be human? Does this sound like scripture at all?

Immediately, I can think of two reasons why this fails us. First, sin is far more than momentum -- a titanic slowly turned around by repeated effort. Sin is willful rebellion against God that can never be turned around, leading to

Sin must be killed, not relearned.

We need rescue, not retraining.

the second reality. When we form new patterns and *still* find that our hearts are not head over heels in love with God, the deception of this thinking will be clear. Only I hope this realization comes sooner rather than later. Sin is not a pattern of behavior encased physiologically in the brain that needs to be relearned and retrained. Sin is a spiritual disease that lives in our very desires, a longing for all that is not God and a captivity to that longing. We do not suffer from patterns, we suffer from willingly joining sin's mission to fixate on ourselves and defame God. Sin must be killed, not relearned. We need rescue, not retraining.

There is, of course, truth to the reality that patterns really do die hard. Having done the same thing over and over for years on end without interruption really turns up the heat knob¹ on the difficulty we experience. But Godly desires, in difficult heat, produce Godly fruit every time. Again, consider Jesus's life, where the knob was on high continuously. Patterns only inform the difficulty of my circumstance, not my power to trust and obey joyfully in it right this moment. And consider the arrogance of thinking that our studies on behavior give us a "one

up” on fighting sin compared to saints of the past, compared to Jesus Christ Himself! Saints were killing sin with overwhelming power long before the dawn of modern biological and psychological endeavors. The gospel alone is our deep cure. It is enough.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TROUBLES

I’d like to just say this before we get into this topic: friend, it’s OK to have psychological troubles. It really is. You aren’t placed at a disadvantage before the gospel. This is because the gospel deals with *desires*. Regardless of how strange we might look to others, Godward desires are the fruit of faith, and they will glorify God even in psychological difficulties. There are times for myself when I am treasuring God deeply and trusting Him strongly with my future, and yet that stunting emotion of anxiety remains. Am I sinning? Not just because I *feel* anxious, no. The gospel doesn’t promise me easy emotions, it promises me real joy during suffering. There is a difference between the state of the body and the direction of our desires and joy. We can have restful hearts while the body is in unrest. So I’ve learned to be comfortable with the chemical difficulties of depression, the sting of insomnia, and other bodily troubles that I personally experience. They have no say over my joy or my infatuation with God, the depth of my fellowship with family in Christ, or my love for the lost.

The gospel doesn’t promise easy emotions, it promises real joy during suffering. We can have restful hearts while the body is in unrest.

Psychological diagnoses are well-made observations, and they are very helpful. Still, they are neither explanations nor cures for sin. Wise use of medications is not wrong, and it helps address the symptoms. Still, no medicine will ever cause me to treasure God above all else, no matter how much the symptoms subside. Depressive disorders, bipolar disorders, anxiety attacks, Asperger's syndrome, Alzheimer's disease, ADHD, and so many other diagnoses are legitimate and often severe troubles for so many of us. It's important to realize that experiencing symptoms and great difficulty is *not a sin*. Loving anything more than God, however, is deadly. And more often than we like to admit, sinful desires are at play. Is sin caused by chemical imbalance or physiological problems? Perhaps social difficulties or temptations to isolate and fixate with tunnel vision can come of them, along with other troubles and temptations. But social awkwardness and temptation are not sin. Faith can express itself in obedience uniquely and creatively in any context, even if it looks strange. Having mental troubles is not a sin. The *desires* are what indicate sin.

Experiencing symptoms and great difficulty is not a sin. Loving anything more than God, however, is deadly.

Bipolar disease cannot cause me to buy things online this week and isolate in severe depression next week. Temptation may come quite strong through the legitimate, even physiological, difficulty. But my sinful desires are what provide the hook for temptation to do its work. ADHD can fuel great difficulty for me personally and socially, but it cannot make me shirk responsibilities to my family, job, or church. Introversion cannot make me respect peoples’ approval of me more than God's, and it cannot keep me from speaking the gospel boldly. More than this, God’s power is especially evident *in weakness*. We really do have power to thank Him

genuinely for the challenges in our lives as scripture calls us to do. This is because it trumpets God's glory for the good of the entire world. Our thankfulness for trials is rooted in who God is.

God cares about our difficulty. More than that, His power is not intimidated by it. Disorders are not things to trivialize or needlessly paint in black and white with a single rule of thumb. We are not mathematical formulae or biological entities converting various forms of energy. We are relational humans made in the image of God, living ever in light of God, and rising and falling in relation to God. Somewhere in the mix, we all have sinful desires either thriving in our lives or being put down by the Spirit. Sinful momentum is no match for repenting and obeying by faith, right this very moment. We can repent and obey by faith powerfully in any trial, stopping "lawlessness leading to further lawlessness"² dead in its tracks.

Sinful momentum is no match for repenting and obeying by faith, right this very moment.

TURNING THE HEAT DOWN

That being said, when the heat is on in life, it is not always *sinful* to take measures to turn the heat down. When suffering unusually difficult depressive tendencies, I think it's a great idea to ask: *Am I dehydrated? Am I hungry? Am I tired? Am I exercising? Am I eating well?* We do not place our hope in these things, and they have little value in changing the heart. But sometimes eating a Snickers really is wise. Sleeping well is taking care of our body and is wise. Likewise, medications that reduce the symptoms of depression can be wise. But none of that can cause me to love God. Only the Spirit can do that. If the heat can be turned down without idolatry or sinful escape, then why not take wise measures to turn it down?

We can obey by faith joyfully with physiological difficulties.

THE ROOT OF SIN

As simplistic as it may sound, the root of sin is our captive sinful heart itself. Unfortunately, "I want..." is as deep as it goes. "I want..." doesn't ask our minds for permission before it hijacks us. We generate one sinful desire after another from our own hearts, and this is where the devastation originates. Nothing we throw at sinful desires can change them to the slightest extent. They pounce on any and every opportunity laid before them. You can change the circumstances, but sinful desires remain unchanged, likely hidden, and ready to produce new and destructive fruit in our lives. You can strive to have felt needs met: eat a feast, indulge in sexual satisfaction, get skinny, invest in friends so they invest in you, move to a better neighborhood, and so on. But sinful lusts, the ones that push past God to get whatever they want because He is not the ultimate object of their reach, remain unchanged and even emboldened by the provision we feed them.

"I want..." doesn't ask our minds for permission before it hijacks us.

What we desperately need is for our very *desires* to change, something many of us have come to think is not really possible. I love the hope this gives to Christians struggling with same-sex attractions in our modern psychological culture of immutability and predeterminism. You may ask: "You mean my sexual desires need to change?" To which I would respond, "Friend, all

of everyone's deepest desires need to change. And they actually can!" We all desperately need to long for God above all else, and this is the deepest change possible. It's the only orientation that matters. In our natural state, our tree is diseased through and through with sin.

We cannot say to ourselves: "Why in the world am I so obsessed with my weight and my body? I know I grew up without a father figure, and I never really felt like I belonged with friends growing up. If only I could belong to a group of people now and have a father figure in my life, I wouldn't be so trapped." We cannot say: "Why can I not keep my eyes off of women? Why can I not stop fantasizing and masturbating? If only I could get just the right woman who knows me, someone I relate to, someone I can just be with and we understand each other perfectly. If only that could happen, I would be rid of this mess!" We cannot say: "Why can't I stop being so angry? If only this person would apologize for their abuse, I would be free of this obsessive anger." These all feel like cures, but they really aren't. They do nothing to sin. Were your biggest Earthly dream to come true in its entirety, your sinful lusts would remain, and they will wage their war like nothing ever happened. We carry the problem with us everywhere we go. We need something better.

We carry the problem with us everywhere we go.

- Has the idea of change given you headaches in the past? What about who God is most helps you rest from that sort of confusion and introspection?
- Where do you cry out, "I need!" in your own heart? In your own words, what does it look like to trust God with that desire? Where is it difficult?
- How did "Why do I sin?" change your view of your own sin? How does looking at Jesus's life help clarify things for that area? Does it encourage you to know you have access to His heart and that you participate in His nature?

THE ROOT OF OBEDIENCE

We may not think of this very often, but just as there is a root of sin, there is a root of obedience as well. In fact, it is no insignificant part of our disease that we fixate on sin and its root while practically ignoring obedience and its root. But it is sin that is the side issue.

JESUS OBEYED DURING EXTREME TRIALS

To see the root of obedience, we look to Jesus. Not only did He live perpetually with unmet needs, His circumstances were beyond difficult to say the least. We cannot fathom the depth of His difficulty and wounds. But Jesus embarrassed His immense suffering with brilliant, unwavering trust and obedience. He fully trusted His Father, lived obediently even to the point of death, and displayed true love so deeply that John says "by this we know love" (1 John 3:16). How is this possible? Jesus has a pure heart that loves the Father. Jesus's desires were for the Father alone

The root of obedience is Jesus's pure heart that desires the Father more than anything.

and did not push past Him for other things. He had joy like we cannot imagine, all springing up from the root of obedience: His pure heart.

Just as sin seizes opportunity through circumstances to produce all manner of evil in our lives, Godly desires also seize opportunity through circumstances to produce all manner of obedience: rampant, spreading, uncontrollable obedience. Unique Godward desires work through unique life circumstances to produce fruit that glorifies God in diverse ways. Sin is not the only one that can claim rule over our actions in the midst of any circumstance. As Romans puts it so well, where sin abounded, grace abounds all the more! As Colossians puts it, where sin had ruled, Christ disarmed it and made a public mockery of it. *However much we respect sin, we should much more respect the gospel's power.* Our eyes are fixed on God's power that He worked in Christ and in us with Christ.

THE TRINITY: GOD'S LOVE ON DISPLAY

Let's look at the root of obedience more closely, though, in Jesus's life. What were His longings? "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." (John 4:34). "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing." (John 5:19). "'Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven: 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'" (John 12:28). "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, *that the Father may be glorified* in the Son." (John 14:13). Read John 17, where we get to eavesdrop on what is possibly the most intimate account of how God works as a trinity. He trusts His Father, loves His Father, longs to glorify His Father, knows His Father well, and seeks exactly what His Father seeks. Not one thought, longing, or action departs from His Father.

Look at the whole Trinity for that matter. The Spirit searches the depths of the Father revealing Him to us, honors and submits to Jesus in being sent to dwell with us, and expresses the Father's love to His Son. The Son submits to and glorifies the Father, accomplishing His work obediently to death on our behalf, displaying the Father perfectly to fallen mankind. The Father glorifies His son proudly and leads Him perfectly even through death, raising Him to glory. We see this beautiful dance of leadership, submission, mutual glorification and joy, confident and inseparable unity, and pleasure beyond anything our minds could ever comprehend. This has been going on from eternity past and will extend without a hiccup into eternity future. It is in this relationship that the root of obedience lives and breathes, and John 17 is our hope of Jesus pulling us into the all-consuming joy of the Trinity!

HOW DO WE CHANGE?

This is the million-dollar question, isn't it? So *how* do we change? In short, we change solely because it is God who changes us. As we walk out our salvation in daily life, we fix our eyes and our hopes solely on the Father as He powerfully works in us the exact power He

worked in Jesus when He crushed Him, raised Him from the dead, and seated Him in heaven by His side. We change by His power as we're joined with Jesus in undeserved grace.

CHOP DOWN THE TREE

The tree analogy shows us Jesus, obeying perfectly and reliably in circumstances and pits of unmet needs we cannot imagine. Then it shows us ourselves by contrast, how easily we cave, how quickly we grumble, and how readily we excuse. We see two very different trees, and it becomes clear that no power on Earth, no strategy, is going to bridge the gap. It's beyond the ability of our hands. You don't spray the roots of the rotten tree to rid its disease. The sinful tree is in and of itself a disease – one that grows, spreads, suppresses the view of God, and invites others to live in its diseased branches, eat its diseased fruit, and die. But Scripture has something further to say about this tree.

"Chop down the tree and lop off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts flee from under it and the birds from its branches." (Daniel 4:14). "If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." (John 15:6). "He said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down.'" (Luke 13:7). "A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matthew 7:18-19).

The sinful tree is not reformed at all. It is uprooted, killed, and burned. There is no path to turn a sinful tree into an obedient one any more than one can take our sinful desires and tame them into Godly desires. Romans 1-3 shows no hint of reforming the sinful lusts that hold us captive. Nor are the sinful lusts satisfied. We see only that they are killed. We are helpless by any effort of ours or any power that exists on Earth. Rescue is really our only hope at this point.

DEAD TREES, NEW TREES

A SOLO RESCUE

Rescue is *God's* work, it is in God's domain, and if an eternally useful thing was done, then God alone did it. This shapes every ounce of our striving. You'll find that this does not make for lazy redemption on our part, but it fuels an intensity of striving that is simply not possible without knowing and trusting God in His solo rescue. The intensity of striving might even make a lifetime legalist uncomfortable. This is because redemption is fueled by a gaze so enamored by God that what we stand to earn or forfeit begins to lose meaning altogether. Earning and protecting fade from view like blindfolds removed. We learn to fix our eyes on Jesus in trust as we strive.

*With our eyes fixed on Jesus,
earning and protecting fade from
view like blindfolds removed.*

JOINED WITH JESUS

This naturally leads to the question: What is it about God's good message that should steal our gaze so powerfully? I don't explicitly ask this too often, but I want you to put this down for now and pore over Romans 6:1-14.

This is where the cross meets us. Jesus's death means our death, His resurrection means our resurrection, His defeat of sin means our defeat of sin, and His new life to God means our new life to God. This is exactly why Paul, in Ephesians 1, prays that God would reveal to our hearts "what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might *that he worked in Christ* when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places." What happened to Christ is also done to us. We are inseparably tied to Him until eternity future, hidden with Him at the Father's side, kept safe until He comes again (Colossians 3:3).

Yes, the old tree *does* get chopped down. No mercy is retained for our sinful roots. They are uprooted, killed, and burned as we die with Jesus. The body of sin is brought to nothing. We are never again enslaved to it. But not only this, we rise with Jesus as well, as new creatures, now servants of God, a better master whom we serve from love joyfully. Just as Jesus's life is directed toward God, so now our life is directed toward God. We are *given* our righteous roots, roots so powerful they can overcome just as Christ overcame the grave. The important thing to realize here is that this is all done by *God* and not by us. It is not because we earned, deserved, or even had the potential to deserve. Ephesians is clear. We were dead, and God according to *His* great mercy and according to the working of *His* great might brought us to life with Jesus. There is no might or means on Earth that can help our sinful roots. But God in His incredible mercy and power, because He is who He is, chose to love us, to compassionately and powerfully bring us to life, even when we had no idea we needed it.

The number one thing to grasp in striving is that sinful roots are out of our reach to kill by our means, and righteous roots are out of our reach to make our own. There are no life tricks, no steps, and no game plan that alone will rescue us. We run empty-handed and needy to Jesus, who alone died in our place to redeem us. It is God's solo work. Before we go anywhere with our work, we need to see and savor *His* work. We must realize that whatever we do, if something eternal was done, God alone did it. Yet as we'll see next, we are by no means passive people in this any more than we were passive under sin. We are active, and our eyes and hopes are on God alone.

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*No steps will rescue us.
We run empty-handed
and needy to Jesus.*

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- How does it strike you to think of Jesus's heart being the root of obedience?
- What does "Joined with Christ" mean for your fears of not being able to change?
- What does it mean for your pride of thinking you can change on your own?

AN EXAMPLE FROM MOSES

HOLDING UP STICKS

Let's return to the Exodus to see a revealing picture of striving and how it interacts with God's power in Exodus 14. God hardens Pharaoh's heart yet again, and Pharaoh decides to relentlessly pursue the Israelites. But how does Moses obey? He first displays strong faith, countering Israel's complaints, faithlessness, and accusations against God with a command to stand and watch His power. God then says to Moses, "Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground." Did you see what God actually told Moses to do? He actually commands Moses to *part the sea himself*. And He commands Moses to do this by doing something tangible: "holding up a stick." Can Moses part a sea? Clearly he cannot. But he surely can hold up a stick by faith in a powerful God.

So what actually happens when Moses holds up a stick? "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and *the Lord drove the sea back* by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided." God commands Moses to part the sea, and perhaps at face value it looks to the Israelites like Moses indeed drove back the sea. But we also read that it was really God who drove back the sea. This captures the dance of God's commands, our work, and God's work. Friend, you and I hold up sticks, and let's not kid ourselves to think anything different about our striving. We boast in the *Lord*! When we preach the gospel to ourselves and others, cut off provision from the flesh, give provision to the Spirit, and worship together, we hold up sticks. All the while, it is *God* who does the impossible. The Titanic of sin isn't turned around. It's utterly demolished and sunk, and its distracting power to steal our gaze from God is sunk with it. This is God's power at work as we hold up sticks by faith.

PROMISES, COMMANDS, AND WARNINGS

Have you noticed the Bible balances things that sound like "God holds you firmly until the end" with "Be sure that you endure to the end" and "only those who endure to the end will be saved"? We see promise, command, and warning about the exact same things. It's confusing until we see God's promises as the foundation that breathes life into His commands and warnings. They don't contrast one another, but they link arms in a united front to save God's people.

Do we have a part to play in redemption? Absolutely. We are called to *trust and obey*. And in that, the real redemptive work is all God's. The warnings are part of God holding us by His power through faith (1 Peter 1) because those with the Spirit heed warnings with fear and trembling and run to Jesus in confidence. We are commanded to do the impossible, and that command comes with real things we do in real life. In those real things we do by faith in real life, God parts seas and drowns enemies in order to bring us to Himself. We cannot ignore any part of that: the real means of change, our trust and obedience, and the whole point of it all.

STRIVING THAT HAS POWER

Our striving by faith has guaranteed, firmly promised, Spirit-driven power beyond anything the unsaved world can comprehend. Sin *does* get killed. New desires *do* arise and

flourish. The gospel *does* spread in impossible contexts. Suffering people *do* have joy. We really *do* commune with a perfect God. We really *do* eavesdrop and even interact with an intimate trinity relationship that has awed all of creation from eternity past to eternity future. The inheritance of 1 Peter really *is* ours. The revelation of Ephesians 1 really *does* powerfully snatch us from death into life. God really *is* displayed by us. If we're guaranteed that our striving actually does something, then friend, that's some good motivation to strive!

Our striving has guaranteed Spirit-driven power beyond anything the unsaved world can comprehend.

IS IT GOD'S WORK OR MY WORK?

Striving on our part consists of *obedience because we trust Him*. In their letter to the Philippians, Paul and Timothy show us a picture of (1) God directing His work into us and (2) us working that same work outward. We read that even our choice to work and our actual working are all attributed to God's work alone (Philippians 2:12-13). Is there mystery in there? You bet! But we should focus where scripture focuses. So what is the focus of this verse? We see suffering. We see united humility in the mind of Christ. We see a display of God's power in exalting a humble Christ. And finally, we see God's power in exalting Christ linked to the power He works in us. Immediately following, Paul commands us to suffer without grumbling. So the point of those mysterious verses is (1) to behold God's work in exalting Jesus, realizing He's doing the same work in us, (2) to work that outward with one another, particularly during suffering, and (3) to display this to the world as shining lights.

A SOURCE, A CONTEXT, AND A PURPOSE

To repeat what we just learned from Philippians 2:

1. Our work should be fueled by beholding and savoring God's work in Christ, knowing that the same power works in us and out of us.
2. Our work is real-life and tangible, united in community, and should be active in any context, especially suffering: "do all things without grumbling or disputing."
3. Our united work is intended to spread God to those around us: "among whom you shine as lights in the world."

Striving has a source, a context, and a purpose. With the first point, in close proximity to any command of scripture is a promise or attribute of God that displays His glory. These are intended to fuel our trust in obeying the commands and warnings. Inherent to all striving and obedience is an underlying *beholding* of God's glory. This beholding is the starting point of all redemption and the groundwork for all change. As we strive, our eyes should be entirely fixed on God, knowing that power for redemption is rooted in His work in Jesus.

Next, our striving is real, tangible, and in community. It involves actions and others. The beholding that fuels our trust also expresses itself in real life. Just as disbelief and godlessness lead to real disobedience, belief and God's presence lead to real obedience. We go astray if we ignore the ground-level realities of how God has called us to live by faith because scripture

doesn't waste its words. Further, it's inherently in *community* as we see all throughout scripture. The biggest indicator of our trust in God is not "personal holiness." It is *brotherly love* toward one another and pursuit of the lost. How do we live with the church? Do we breathe life to those around us, functioning as a vibrant and working part within the body to accomplish God's mission of displaying Himself to the world? Or are we isolated and dysfunctional?

Finally, all community redemption and striving exists for God's mission, God's goal. Joining God on His mission to spread His display and further His promise to Abraham to bless all families of the Earth through Jesus is the end goal of our collective rescue. Our new desires that conquer sin have but one mission: God glorified. To be rescued from sin is to be infatuated with God. To be infatuated with God is to long to spread Him. God is spreading His name through us to all nations of the Earth so that all people groups will know Him and love Him diversely in a united chorus of praise. Together, the global church will savor His nature and melt in His presence with joy and satisfaction at being face to face with God finally and forever. Together, we will be fully redeemed. There is no greater end to redemption. There is no other possible end.

These three themes form the next and last three chapters of this curriculum.

- Did "Holding up sticks" comfort your apprehensions and confusions about change? How does it impact you to know that the *real* miracles and work are in God's domain?
- In what areas do you struggle leaving the real change to God's hands? What do you think is fueling that distrust?
- What about who God is helps inspire trust in your heart for that area? What biblical story most helps you behold God more clearly as a sure rescuer for His people?
- Are you tempted to be heady about the mystery of God's work and your work? What about God's character helps draw you out of that to trust Him?

PAINTING A PICTURE OF REDEMPTION

Ending this chapter, I would like to paint some rough strokes of what striving will look like. There are far more intricate things in God's word than any of us will ever fully come to realize. Most of your redemption will come from first-hand realities from God's word that you cultivate and learn to savor. This curriculum is merely a spur to get that process going.

RELATIONAL MORE THAN FACTUAL

While redemption commands us to use all the gifts God has given us including our minds and thoughts, the core of redemption is not facts about God. It is us *relating* to God. We see phrases like "walk by the Spirit," "led by the Spirit," "live by the Spirit," "know God," etc. In John, we hear Jesus say, "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God." In Exodus 19, we see the end of redemption: being brought out of captivity *to God Himself*. In the Ephesians 1 enlightening of our eyes, we encounter God personally and intimately. Facts stopped short of the God they are meant to lead us to are dangerous. Strive to dwell with God as you learn about Him. When you read of His justice, anger, sacrifice, compassion, and

steadfastness, follow these in praise and prayer to dwell with the God they describe. Relationship is the goal. *Enjoy Him!*

PROGRESSIVE RATHER THAN INSTANT

Redemption is a progressive act of God's and not something that happens necessarily quickly. For certain, we are hid in Christ and fully justified this very moment, completely and forever. Also, we can obey fully in any circumstance right this moment. But there is still a battle to be waged in the "here and now." Sinful desires do not gradually become good, and Godly desires do not gradually become any better. But beholding God does grow in clarity, trusting God grows in power, and obeying God grows in consistency. In Ephesians, 2 Peter, and Hebrews, we see the general notion that growth is primarily in ground-level beholding God together, trusting God together, obeying God together, and displaying God together. 2 Peter in particular displays growth as making sure that knowing God leads to what it was meant for. Peter wants to ensure that the progression doesn't stall out at any point, that our knowledge is fruitful as God defines fruitful. Progress involves our hard striving, and it is anchored in God's solo, guaranteed rescue.

COLLECTIVE RATHER THAN INDIVIDUAL

Looking at notions of growth in the Bible, we see that it is inevitably tied to community. The Corinthians cannot eat "solid food" because they are contentious, divisive, boastful, proud, envious, coddling sin, and so on. These are not "personal" sins. They are family sins. Growth is

intimately tied to unity with other believers. Mutually submitting to one another in diverse roles, we display God's truth in love. Individually and collectively, we are priests on a mission to reconcile many from all nations to God. It's dangerous to confine our assessment of our faith to "personal holiness" because most holiness in the Bible is corporate holiness: how we treat our brother and our neighbor. Personal holiness breathes into this. But if it doesn't result in loving our brother and neighbor, then it isn't really holiness at all because we look nothing like our holy God, who is a Trinity. Think of redemption primarily as a family activity. Your obedience enlightens your family's hearts, and their obedience enlightens your heart.

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result in corporate holiness, then
it isn't really holiness at all.*

DESTINATION IS GOD HIMSELF

There is no other destination or goal for redemption except that we, together, get God Himself. We become like God, receive God, trust God, obey God, enjoy God, and display God. God is not just enough for us, He overflows for us.

DIFFICULT INSTEAD OF EASY

My heart in this is: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12). Expect things to be quite difficult. Expect to not know what to do at times and to be at your wit's end.

Expect to be in over your head. This is God's design for our good. Run to Him! Flee to the refuge of the Psalms! Pour out your heart before Him! There is good reason why we have so many promises of His approachableness because of Jesus, His compassion, His power, and His control. Redemption will be very difficult, and it will push you to God's arms in faith. Expect this, and know this. When you are overwhelmed, learn the cries of the Psalmists and the cries of Jesus. Also, we will be striving very hard, harder than ever before, the more we learn about God. As Paul says, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it." Our effort will look like that of a top-conditioned Olympic athlete settling for nothing less than first place. Yes, seriously. But it is still restful because Jesus did all the work we need, and rescue *depends* on His work. Our work depends on His work.

MANY SINFUL DESIRES AND NOT JUST ONE

You may have come here primarily for only one sin issue or one difficult suffering. This is fine as long as you're willing to table that issue for a while as you read scripture and let God speak to *all* of your heart. God's mission is to put down all sinful desires and to make sense of all of life. He sees things differently than you and I do, and He shares His view with us. There is no "one root sinful desire" in your life. There are a host of sinful desires, each of which must be killed, and they exist on a range of power and influence right now. As you kill some sinful desires, expect others to become the dominant ones. Expect to find new sins that you didn't realize you dealt with. This is a grace to us. It's my prayer that you will long to be like God in all areas of your life and not only the one that precipitated your coming here.

RESTFUL AND CONFIDENT INSTEAD OF ANXIETY-RIDDEN

Knowing that redemption involves extreme striving means there will probably be times of anxiety in our hearts. We need to fight anxiety and realize that Jesus did not intend our extreme striving to be anxious or dependent on our effort being "perfect." If you find yourself burning out, this is a heart issue, not a striving

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issue. It's time to behold the truths of God's sovereignty, His control over all things, His promise to *bring you* full to the end, the guaranteed justification that has already happened, and a guaranteed inheritance to come. Place your hope and longing toward heaven once again. His control means we do not have to grasp for control by our own means. This frees us to trust, enjoy, and obey in *rest*. It also frees us to fail because we do not forfeit God's grace. Fix your eyes on His glory again, enjoy Him, and strive with the trust that breathes into you. It frees us to let redemption be a process. Anxious striving is a red flag that we're doing it wrong, walking not in the Spirit but in the flesh. Rest in Him as you strive hard. Repent often because anxiety will happen.

CALCULATED AND INTELLIGENT INSTEAD OF AUTOMATIC

We have lived our entire lives in the flesh before being saved, and we know from previous chapters that redemption will not always feel natural. God will feel unnatural to our

flesh. The word “organic” is very popular in church culture today, and it has right meanings and wrong meanings. When we intend it to mean that redemption just happens in a community without calculation and effort, we’re dead wrong. When we intend it to mean that we should prefer relationship and addressing the heart instead of relying endlessly on structure and rules, then we’re on target. We need to know that redemption is not automatic or mindless. We don’t just “love God” in the abstract without knowing what that actually means. Otherwise, why does scripture spend so much time talking specifics? We must take scripture at its word when it tells us how to use evidence in our lives to know if our love of God is real and fruitful.

Also, for sure, we plant and water while God alone gives the growth. We cannot cause growth. But have you ever met a farmer who doesn’t plant intelligently, at the right time, in rows spaced apart just the right length, using pesticides, pulling weeds at the right time in the right way, and so on? Do they not water a certain time of day with a certain amount for certain plants, fertilizing when needed, digging trenches in times of flood and irrigating in times of drought? Do they not innovate, plan, and advance the science of farming? For sure, we cannot cause growth, but we are foolish if we do not pay attention to the specifics of the Word and set all of our resources given to us by God toward the task of beholding, trusting, obeying, and displaying Him together.

That being said, know that we are still walking by the Spirit, and we need not *fear* difficulty, complexity, and intentionality. We need to grow comfortable with difficulty, complexity, and intentionality. Yet this can only come from trust in God’s control and power through weak vessels. At all times, this is God’s work in us, and we can strive hard *and* restfully. Perhaps you aren’t enjoying God and resting in Him as you look at how to address growth. If so, then take that as a gracious signpost to run to Him and behold His control over your redemption. Trust Him and rest as you work hard through difficult complexities.

WE SHOULD LIVE SUCH THAT WE *NEED* GOD’S TRUTHS

This can be both an encouragement and a warning. To those who often find themselves worn and desperate from striving by faith, this is a welcomed encouragement. To those who don’t see much value and pleasure in the truths “God is in complete control” and “God is walking with you,” this is

a stern warning. We should be living in such a way that we *need* and *rely on* these precious truths. Those who do not join God’s mission and are not enthralled with Him live lives of mediocrity and have little pleasure in, “Rest, faithful servant, because I am in control. You can trust me.” But those who are fighting sin by right means and motives, who are uprooted by redemption, who are on mission and infatuated with God, who are striving as those who want to win first place – they regularly and often need to hear these sweet words. They need God’s precious promises and rely on them desperately on an hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute basis, quickly repenting and walking with God. His promises are a sure stream of water for the weary, giving life to the soul. It’s implied that we would need these promises often. We should be

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living in such a way that we really *need* to dwell with the God of refreshment and sure control. If His promises aren't sweet, we are blind and stagnant, so we need to hear the gospel again.

- What did you envision redemption being like? Did anything stand out to you in "Painting a picture of redemption" that confronts how you envisioned things going?
- Where in life are you living complacently? Does having a sure refuge lure you, or does it feel unappealing?

ACTION

This chapter is largely about understanding sin and obedience more deeply. It's about seeing the depth of change that is truly needed, how that is way beyond our reach, and just how big Jesus's rescue really is. Seeing how this is all in God's hands, there is no bigger practical implication for our lives than *prayer*. If it really is all in His hands, then more than anything, we must learn to become a praying people. This whole group is so risky! It's set up to be a miserable failure if God does not show up for us individually and when we're together. Why does it work, then? Because of a trustworthy God, that's why. This season will fail without prayer. Our prayers are so powerful because God is faithful to His promise to act powerfully for us.

1. Find a Psalm where the Psalmist cries out for God to get up and act. Let this be a guide for you in your prayer, learning how to cry out, how to pour out your heart, and how to be real with what life looks like and who God says He is at the same time.
2. Pray individually each day this week as you're encountering one of those maddening times when you feel insane with desires for that idol that is most plaguing you. Take a chunk of time aside to empty your hands and cry out to God to rescue you. Recall who He is, what He's done in the past, what He has promised, what He's doing now, and call on Him to act. Also beg Him for faith to trust His power when times are tough.
3. Pray in community with this person you have started to meet with in your community group. Ask them how they long for God to act and show up, and pray together. Learn from one another, and be spurred by one another. Have a time of purely asking God to show up, telling Him how desperate the situation is, and telling Him how needy you are for His power to do real things in your lives.

¹ I'm borrowing the term "heat" from *How People Change* by Tim Lane and Paul Tripp (New Growth Press). It's a great book from which I'm sure I've absorbed a lot of the things you're reading in this curriculum. You should check it out.

² Romans 6:19

CHAPTER 7: LIVING IN THE SANCTUARY

"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:19-22)

"O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you." (Psalm 63:1-3)

BLIND AND UNAWARE

A man's car breaks down in the middle of a desert, and he knows all too well how remote this area is. No one is going to stumble upon him for days, and by the time they find him, he will have died of thirst. So he sets off to find water. But as he's walking, the sun is oppressive, beating down on him mercilessly, sapping his will right out of him. As he walks around, everything is so bright that even while squinting, it's painful. By nightfall, the light has burned his retinas to the point where he cannot see anymore. Blind, unfeeling, and weary, he gives up, sits down where he is, and dies. Days later, people indeed do find his car. Then, 15 miles away, they find his body. But alarmingly, they find it 20 yards from a thriving oasis.

Yes, I made that story up, and yes, it's quite morbid. But so is the state of our souls that walk through a desert without God. Idolatry renders us blind, calloused, lifeless, lame, and hopeless as we become just like the idols we worship. What is so scary about this picture is that in our blindness, we do not see the oasis 20 yards ahead of us. In our callousness, we cannot feel the moisture in the air, sensing the pleasure that waits just beside us. In our disability and hopelessness, we have neither the will to approach the oasis nor the ability to do so. And most desperate of all is the sheer glory and worth of what lies so close to us, and yet we are unaware of it altogether.

When we walk around with God absent from our moment-to-moment thoughts, longings, fantasies, and enjoyment, we are just like this man in the desert. Our sin is rendering us blind, unfeeling, and lame. We need the sanctuary where God dwells as an oasis. We need it often to restore sight, feeling, and life.

*We need the sanctuary of
God's presence to restore
sight, feeling, and life.*

A COSTLY OASIS

The verses above reveal what dwelling with God means for us. They reveal why it was such an astounding promise that God made to Israel in Exodus 19, where He promised to bring them to *Himself* while they were in the desert. The promise was gentle and intimate, but Israel

quickly forfeited the conditional promise by their disobedience. And we are just like Israel. The sanctuary became a restricted place of dread and longing, contrasting God's purity against mankind's filth. It became a place of blood and gore, demonstrating the price needed to reconcile us to God. It wasn't until Jesus obeyed where we could not that what we now know as a New Testament promise finally came to God's people. It is unconditional for us because it depends on Jesus's obedience, not ours. The veil of separation was torn, and the sanctuary finally became an approachable place of reconciliation, purchased by the highest cost imaginable.

Jesus settled once and for all every notion of unfitness we could be accused of when approaching God. God is pleased even with our tainted obedience because Jesus obeyed where we could not. Jesus, going before us and cleansing us, has transformed

the sanctuary from a place of distance, blood, and longing for rescue into a place of intimacy, mercy, and redemption. This grace cannot be exaggerated. It cannot. When our day-to-day lives avoid God's sanctuary, we cheapen it. There, we dwell with God and see Him as He truly is. Trust is cultivated, desires are grown, and weariness gives way to revelation. The sanctuary is not a building or a place. God dwells with *us* now, and we enjoy Him closely at all times.

Jesus settled once and for all every notion of unfitness we could be accused of when approaching God.

- Can you see yourself as the man in the desert? In your own words, what is most blinding you to the oasis?
- What about God's nature makes this oasis seem the most enticing in your weariness?
- How does it change things to see how much Jesus had to do in order to give you this oasis?

COMMANDED TO BEHOLD

In scripture, we see examples of beholding: "his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Psalm 1). We also see commands to behold: "Set your minds on things that are above" (Colossians 3:2) and "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, [...], think about these things" (Philippians 4:8). We see contrasts commanding us to behold: "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit" (Romans 8:5). But so much more than this, I want to challenge you to read through scripture, even the sections that seem to focus on commands, and look carefully for what it says *about God*. You'll probably be shocked at how often scripture shows us who God is and appeals to His nature and promises as it gives commands. Consider the surprising revelation of God's nature in James 1. Look for it. Hunt for who God is and what He's promised.

God's word constantly appeals for us to behold God. In fact, faith can be thought of as the direction of our heart's gaze as we obey¹. It's what our hearts are set on as we strive. Sometimes, when we think of hard striving, we immediately consider it to be legalistic. But to be honest, hard striving is a given for us. The question is *why* we strive hard. For sure, we can

strive wrongly, but wrong motivation has a simple, deep cure: beholding God's nature and promises. Legalism and the prosperity gospel will likely happen often in our lives on varying levels from time to time. Think of them as a meter that tells you how your trust is doing. A legalistic mindset is a diagnosis and a warning that something has gone astray with our beholding. The gospel message alone is our rescue from this. Beholding is one discipline that redemption cannot proceed without.

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that redemption cannot
proceed without.*

HOW DO THE APOSTLES ADDRESS SIN?

Paul asks one of the most commonly asked questions I know of in Southern culture as we first learn the unsettling reality that disobedience cannot dis-earn grace any more than obedience can earn grace. Paul asks, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" Again he asks, "Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?" (Romans 6). I've heard (and I've given) some lengthy and convoluted answers to these questions. But Paul is much quicker about it. Please indulge me for a moment in a loose paraphrase of Paul's response. *Of course not! You died with Christ to sin. You rose with Christ to new life. Sin, your captor, was destroyed, and you were freed. Sin has no power over you. You are now a servant of God gladly, from the heart. Look to the end of sanctification: Christ receiving your paycheck of wrath and giving you the free gift of eternal life.*

Paul doesn't waste time on heady arguments. It's as if he cries, "How can you possibly hear the message I just told you and still be asking about *sin*? Did you even hear it? Move your eyes, believer! Don't you realize what He's done and what that means? Let's go over it again!" He brushes past the façade of a heady argument, and he moves right back into what is of first importance: the gospel.

He diagnoses the biggest problem with the questioner: that their focus is *still* on sin and not on gospel. It's an appeal to behold God again. Not only do our eyes and our thoughts move toward Christ ("let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith"²) but our longings move toward Christ ("set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ"³ and "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God"⁴).

These commands, examples, and appeals to see and savor God's nature and promises are intertwined with commands to obey. The two cannot exist apart from one another, not biblically. If we truly behold, then we will grow in trust. We will obey in that same trust.

IT'S NOT JUST THE MIND

I'm wary of counsel that seems to focus entirely on the mind. There is no doubt that the mind exerts considerable influence on our lives, and I'm not debating that. However, our western understanding of "mind" tends to be overly sterile. Emphasis is placed on replacing sinful and godless thoughts with correct thoughts, and often enough, it stops there. When it does, the heart of redemption is ripped out: enjoying, longing, tasting, and seeing. It is not merely about getting the right thoughts in our head, but those thoughts must produce fruit that includes and exceeds emotion, piercing to our desires, then to our wills and our posture before

God. Those thoughts should not be inward gazing but outward gazing, leading us to see and taste God, whose presence astounds us every single time we approach Him, revealing and unravelling our distorted views of Him. They should not be individual but corporate. They are not self-speak, but rather we speak to God and melt before His words to us. We *walk with Him*.

It is a battlefield in the mind, yet it goes far beyond the mind. It replaces our very core desires: “walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16). It then leads into the very ways we act: “Now the works of the flesh are evident [...] But the fruit of the Spirit is...” (Galatians 5:19,22). Beholding is dwelling and longing as much as it is thinking.

*Beholding is dwelling and
longing as much as it is thinking.*

BEHOLDING GOD IN THE EVERYDAY

“I rise before dawn and cry for help; I hope in your words. My eyes are awake before the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promise.” (Psalm 119:147-148)

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

FALSE LEGALISM

What I hope these scriptures evoke in your heart is a realization of what our day-to-day thoughts, longings, and discussions really ought to be like. Also, beholding inherently has a flavor of hope, joy, and thanksgiving to it. It’s a discipline we *enjoy*. This is a picture of what we strive toward in the everyday, what

our real lives are supposed to look like. Most of us look at Deuteronomy 6 today and call it legalistic because it involves lists, reminders, writing, striving, and discipline. Be wary of that thought, because no action can be legalistic in and of itself. Only our motivations, desires, and gaze can determine legalism. We can and should lead lives that breathe God’s word in and out, lives that look like Deuteronomy 6. And we can do it by faith as we know and trust the God who commands it. A big hurdle in redemption is realizing what the Christian life is supposed to look

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life is supposed to look like.*

like. Partly this is due to our own hard-heartedness, and partly it is due to the lack of good examples in our churches. Don't massage away scripture and mold it to society's default. Mold your own default to the paintings scripture creates.

We must order our time to labor in the word, strive with the Spirit in prayer, and build up the body by pointing to real things about God. We must intentionally plan for our thoughts to run to Jesus when worldly things dominate. We must plan for our longings to stretch out to Jesus. These are real, active, tangible things we do in detail. Yet, we so easily fall to the beckoning call of turning inward in anxiety, of placating loneliness with entertainment, of escaping difficult children with gossip and grumbling, and of filling the silence with more work. We live distracted. We breathe entertainment. Our culture's default is twisted uniquely toward godless busyness.

WHAT IT'S SUPPOSED TO LOOK LIKE

It's likely that your most difficult reorientation in redemption is going to be this everyday discipline of beholding. We do not long for it. We do not relax toward beholding in the easy times. It feels awkward because we aren't familiar with it. We are trained by modern entertainment and convenience for self-seeking and quick rewards. For our culture, I truly believe that this is our weakest link and therefore the backbone of our change. If this discipline stalls, the rest will stall out with it. To the extent that we forsake entertainment, off-the-hours work, and distraction in order to dwell intimately with a real, present God, I believe we will see powerful change work its way out by His power. This forsaking distraction and running to God, though we do it, is ultimately God's power at work in us. Since it is His power at work, we have confidence that those small, everyday actions actually do something powerful. We must set our hearts to the discipline of beholding. We must order our days around it.

- Have you found yourself accusing lists, discipline, and hard striving as being legalistic?
- As you strive hard, how does it change things to remember that Jesus alone makes you right in God's eyes?

REAL LIFE BEHOLDING

In Galatians 5, we read "But I say, *walk by* the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. [...] But if you are *led by* the Spirit, [...] If we *live by* the Spirit, let us also *keep in step with* the Spirit." This is God's answer to killing sin. Does it sound like a one-time thing, a sometimes thing, or something offloaded to a section of our lives? Is God content to be isolated to religious areas of our life, or does He contend jealously when we forsake Him in *any* area of life? There isn't one part of your life that truly lives in disconnection from the rest of your life or from God, no matter how rigid your compartments are.

The thoughts you are thinking right this very moment; the fantasies playing like little movies in your head; the made-up situations you play, pause, rewind, and play again; the longings that consume you; the plans you make; and the actions you do -- these have profound things to say about redemption, not only for you but for the church body you serve. The church is not only sick because of "them," it's sick because of *you* and *me*. Is that tough to hear? I can

imagine so, but it's also a grace to realize it. We complain, and we do not labor! We condemn, and we do not mourn! We write off, and we do not put our hands to the plow!

These connections and interactions between our real thoughts, longings, fantasies, and actions will be covered more in the next chapter. For now, I want to secure in you the biblical reality that we are called to live lives in which all of these *are directed Godward* all of the time in all situations. For now, I want you to soak in the fact that what you think, long for, picture, and dwell on in the mundane times of life is profoundly important.

Being a vegetable in front of a television is not neutral. It is damaging because of at least two things: (1) it displaces beholding God and (2) the natural direction of the human heart is idolatry. These two realities, together, mean that “coasting” actually leads us into sin. There is no neutral for us. There is no off-limits territory. What you do now has power: to harden or to enlighten. It has power because either we act under sin’s captivity to accomplish sinful ends by sin’s power or we act as God’s adopted children to accomplish God’s redemptive ends by God’s greater power. But no action is void of power to do *something*. It’s both sobering and encouraging.

I want to go through a couple of scenarios to get our minds churning creatively over what beholding God in the everyday can look like.

*What you dwell on in the
mundane details of life is
profoundly important.*

THE COMMUTE

John is on his way home after another day grinding away in a seemingly menial job where he feels like an ant doing meaningless work for a thankless, riding boss. He envisions himself like the cover of a book lying forgotten in the back of a car, fading more and more from exposure to the sun. Color falls flat, cracks form, plastic protectant flakes off, the binding becomes brittle, and the title itself is now barely discernible. Brewing beneath the numbness, written in the pages within, is bitterness, anger, and grumbling for being trapped in a meaningless job. Yet it remains unopened, untouched, and unheard since who would really care anyway?

During the commute home, John fixates on the snapping comment his boss made that day about his performance. He re-imagines scenarios over and over where he talks back to his boss, makes his points, and gets the upper hand. He spends the commute crafting various arguments to get back at his boss, to show him up and to justify himself. Those arguments shift into other areas of his life. He finds his mind crafting arguments against his wife as well, whom he views as similarly unthankful and criticizing. He thinks up the things she has done wrong, crafts new arguments to get the upper hand with her as well, to show her why, by comparison to him, she has no room to speak either. His bitterness and anger brood in his thoughts. His longings reach out for justification, for justice, to be respected, to be seen as valuable and needed. He is addicted to these thoughts and longings, trapped in them, and blinded to pretty much everything else. He is angry with those who withhold these things from him. Like a madman, he swaps back and forth between despising himself with self-pity and justifying himself by despising others. Secure at the center of his thoughts in all of this, though, is one thing: himself.

THE COMMUTE REDEEMED

It has been another tough day at work, pressing with difficulties from a thankless boss and a job of seemingly menial tasks. John struggles with the feeling that his life is amounting to little, and he longs to feel valuable. He knows how he should feel and what he should believe, remembering the scripture he read that morning from Psalm 1: that the blessed one is like a tree reliably producing fruit. But he sees this huge gap between what he feels, where his mind is, and what he knows is true. The truth feels detached and unhelpful at the moment. He struggles even further with despair because he sees himself clearly, how far off-target he is, and he begins to draw inward in his thoughts. He feels it nearly impossible to stop fixating on his anger toward his boss. He feels trapped. But as the Spirit intervenes and puts the realization in his mind that he is living as if God were not there, John runs with this intervention of the Spirit, realizing with a glimpse of hope the grace about to fall on him.

John immediately pictures himself like the tax collector falling before Jesus's cross. He literally cries aloud in the car, "God, I am helpless, and I need you now! Forgive me!" He envisions himself falling before the cross of Jesus, helpless and needy. He enjoys and pictures in his heart, like gulps of water to the dying, Christ receiving wrath that he had earned (all of it, every last drop). He imagines sin itself limping pitifully, sick and defeated, as Christ exposes it to open shame and mockery, and he loses respect for sin's power. He envisions Christ victorious and powerful, compassionate and intervening. He sees his value as the Father pours His delight over Jesus publically: "This is my son, I love Him, and I'm so pleased with Him!" He re-imagines his situation with his boss, seeing Christ belittle the mockery of the cross for the joy set before Him, and he says to the mockery from his boss, "you are nothing but a distraction from my Father!" He turns to the Father and says, "Be near to me right now because I feel so calloused. Help me, God, to see that you are a good Master. Walk me through your patience with Israel. Show me your faithfulness to your promises, no matter what. Thank you so much that you don't just sit above us, detached, demanding, and testing. But you live *with* us, compassionate and enabling us by your power! God, help me see you all the more clearly as the opposite of my boss! Help me even to live out your nature as I submit to my boss. Help me see my wife, too, as you see her, and show me Christ's love for His church. Help me lead my wife, God, as you lead me. Help me show her your nature by example. Help me God, and thank you that I can have confidence in your sure power. I trust you! Stay with me."

THE SPIRIT'S INTERVENTION

Before we move on to another situation, I'd like to take a second and talk about the Holy Spirit's active interventions. 1 Corinthians 10:13 speaks of God's grace in giving us a way of escape. One tangible way that shows up in our lives is when we "wake up" and realize we're thinking sinfully and walking godlessly.

Those moments are incredible graces when you *become aware* that you've lived like an atheist and forgotten God. It's important to recognize when this happens. There is a choice to make, a direction to run. These moments are intended to spur us to run hard, headlong, and empty-handed after Jesus for rescue. Yet sometimes, we take these opportunities and sink right back

*To realize that you've lived
like an atheist and forgotten
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to sleep. Sometimes we realize where our thoughts have been and we begin to chastise ourselves and try to atone for ourselves, causing our thoughts to again be self-focused, leading us back to godless slumber. Other times, we wake up and fear the energy it will take to run to God, longing more for ease and comfort, and we fall back asleep. Please, learn to see these wake-up calls for the graces they are. Trust God, and run hard after Him to keep you awake, and get quickly to the task of *enjoying* Him deeply again.

INSOMNIA

Becca lies awake yet another night. Though her body is tired, her thoughts race, and she cannot seem to make it all the way to sleep. She prays to God to help her sleep, and yet she now only nominally approaches Him, not wanting to invest much in something she fully expects not to change. She feels a latent bitterness toward God for letting this happen over and over. Does He care? Does He know? Is He even there? Her thoughts spin on these doubts to the point where she feels angry toward God over the coming day, which she's already writing off as shot. She wonders at times if she's really even praying or just rehearsing thoughts that are roughly about God in her head. Cold, isolated, lonely thoughts consume her mind – things she will look on the next day in shame and confusion as to why she let herself “go there.” But here and now, she feels tired, frustrated, angry, alone, and empty.

Inside her racing thoughts live scenarios of how her parents have disrespected her, how she argues back at them to make them feel ashamed and herself vindicated. She moves almost instantly to how long she's wanted a companion to just be there, not necessarily a husband per se, but just someone she can rely on and know she has there for her, someone she can be open with without fear of them leaving. She spirals to thoughts of how no one really understands the darkness she has to deal with in her struggles with depression, and she takes refuge in self-pitying thoughts. Amid the stretching hours, she finds that she did at some point eventually sleep. But it must have been an hour or two at best. She drags herself out of bed and into the shower to prepare for another day of work, wondering when things might change.

INSOMNIA REDEEMED

Yet another night, Becca struggles with insomnia and depression. A weight sits on her that she can only describe as trying to lift herself out of the ocean with wet, heavy blankets draped over her, pulling her down. She feels anger brewing, frustration boiling over into a cold feeling that she really is alone. Having become somewhat practiced at moving out of the isolation of depression in these times, though, she trusts God a little more readily to give her powerful help. Remembering Psalm 63, she thinks on how empty she feels, like the Psalmist in a dry and weary land with no water. She realizes that she's not a heretic for telling God she's thinking these thoughts. So she reads it anew and says aloud, “God, you seem so far off, but I need to taste your goodness. I want to enjoy you like rich food.” In particular, she remembers that Jesus knew keen loneliness like no one else in history. She feels a deep fellowship with Jesus, knowing how He knows this feeling far better than she does. She begins to relent from her anger, falling on Him in trust, remembering who He really is, and longing to be joyful in the Father, no matter what, like He is. Remembering how Jesus covers her gives her courage to repent for forgetting about Him during most of the day.

From here, she reads more of the Word, slowly and restfully, dwelling with God, and writing down her prayers to keep the thoughts from flying away. God's presence begins to move her stubborn emotions, even though her body is still painfully tired. Though her body is in great difficulty, her soul rests, and she finds a deep refuge that overwhelms her depressive thoughts with peace. In fact, she trusts in the same refuge for the next time she can't seem to sleep, knowing God has provided an escape in which she can joyfully fellowship with Him. She is confident for tomorrow, knowing that though pressed, she has all she needs to obey with a glad heart: fresh and new grace waiting for her to walk in it. Rest is the condition of her heart now.

WHAT IS YOUR SITUATION REDEEMED LIKE?

Are you suffering panic attacks? Are you having moments where your memory is jogged by a smell or a time of year when you suddenly feel overcome by past trauma? Are you boasting and envisioning yourself lifted up in some situation? Are you overcome by anxieties of how you can possibly balance everything you have going

*It all starts with beholding
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on in your life? Do you struggle with feeling ambivalent and stale, feeling little motivation or desire at all? Do you yearn for entertainment in fits of loneliness? Do you punish yourself for things you've done to take atonement into your own hands? Each everyday situation brings inherent temptations to live absent of God. In fact, if we're honest, we fail quite often to bring God into these situations altogether. We often walk through them alone and in our own heads. Yet it is in these everyday situations that redemption *lives*! The commute isn't a side issue. It is the main issue: how we behold God where we used to ignore and forget Him. It all starts with beholding God as He really is, and this lives in the everyday.

- In what ways do you relate to John's commute? In what ways do you relate to Becca's insomnia? What do similar situations in your own life look like?
- Did their repentance speak to your own situations? What ideas does it give you, and what would your own repentance look like?
- What do the Holy Spirit's interventions, His "wake-up alarms," look like in your own life? Describe an example of when you become aware of how you've been living. How do you usually respond? What would a realistic Godward response look like?

THE SON OF MAN MUST BE LIFTED UP

MAKING IT CLEAR FOR NICODEMUS

Two verses before what is possibly the most famous and memorized verse in the Bible (John 3:16), we find Jesus making one of those odd statements that sound like gibberish unless we've read the storyline of Genesis through Deuteronomy. In fact, the book of John is absolutely riddled with references to Genesis through Deuteronomy. Jesus is talking to a Jewish teacher named Nicodemus, and He preempts Nicodemus's questions by immediately discussing being "born again" in order to see the kingdom of God. I can feel Nicodemus's frustration here

as he just isn't getting it. Jesus, not being ignorant of this, has grace on Nicodemus. So Jesus describes Himself in terms Nicodemus would immediately grasp: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." To understand why this would have been so immediately clear to Nicodemus, we need to head back to the book of Numbers.

ONE-SIDED GRACE IN THE DESERT

To set the scene from the book of Exodus, God made one-sided, unconditional promises to Abraham that He would make a nation from him and bless the entire Earth through his descendants (particularly through Jesus). God also foretold Abraham that his descendants would be held captive for 400 years. He then promised to rescue them powerfully and to give them great possessions as they leave. Throughout God's process of doing this through the well-known plagues and Moses's staff, Israel disbelieves, distrusts, complains, and accuses God. God does rescue them, and they do leave with great possessions. But they soon accuse Him of ill intent as Pharaoh's army presses on them one last time, saying to God, "Did you bring us out to kill us all in a mass grave?"

God again rescues them, makes rich promises, and reminds them who He is and what He's done. They soon, however, grumble about bitter water. He graciously provides sweet water. They grumble then about lack of food, claiming it was better for them in Egypt and that God had done evil to them. God graciously provides manna. Then, they grumble and accuse God as they're lacking water, distrusting God's provision and nature again. He graciously provides yet again and makes generous promises again. They disobey His command to join Him and become His people, a nation of priests, and a prized possession because they still refuse to trust Him. They make a golden calf and ascribe their past rescue and future hope to it at the exact same time that God is detailing to Moses how He plans to still dwell with His people. They grumble and accuse about how boring manna is, and He gives them meat. You guessed it, they still grumble and accuse.

Now, remember that you and I are the same as Israel and need the same rescue.

SNAKES

God decides, as a discipline to His people, to show them more tangibly the state of their souls as they despise Him. So He sends on them "fiery serpents" to bite them. Many of them died as a result of this. Get the picture here. Suddenly, one day, *snakes* are everywhere: in the tents, in the water supply, and in the food. They are biting everyone, killing many. This is a scene of mass panic, fear, bewilderment, hopelessness, and above all: *desperation*. We would be wise to consider these snakes as a picture of the tangible, desperate destruction that our sin causes not only to us but also to all around us.

God's remedy for this situation probably seemed truly odd at the time. He tells Moses to have a serpent crafted from bronze and raised up so that all of the people can see it. Then God tells Moses that anyone who merely looks upon this serpent will be healed from the bites of the serpents. All in all, this can seem like quite the strange episode until we see how Jesus used this story millennia later. He says, "I am that serpent."

Of course, it's natural to ask, "Why in the world would Christ be pictured as a serpent?"

CHRIST BECAME OUR CURSE AND KILLED IT

2 Corinthians 5:21 shows us a picture of the exchange that happened on the cross: “For our sake he *made him to be sin* who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Jesus became the curse that was killing us, so that as we trust Him, we might live. In Numbers, a serpent is lifted up, and whoever looks on it lives. In 1 Corinthians, Jesus is lifted up, and whoever trusts in Him lives forever. The serpent is pointing us to Jesus, gazing is pointing us to faith, and healing is pointing us to eternal life. What I want to highlight is the *gazing* part. How powerful is the command to “gaze on Jesus lifted up!” How do I escape the poison and devastation of sin? I gaze on Jesus lifted up. I behold the cross and reality of what it means. A curse is swapped for perfection. I receive grace too profound to put in words.

*How do I escape the poison
and devastation of sin? I
gaze on Jesus lifted up.*

NEW VIVIDNESS FOR JOHN 3:16

Nicodemus would walk away from this conversation knowing very clearly what Jesus meant by being born again to new life by the Spirit. This is the context to the most famous verse in the Bible today. It breathes vividness into the verse: “for God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” We realize with Nicodemus that you and I are *already* dying, bitten by fiery serpents, wasting away toward sure death because of our sin. And we are helpless in this, desperate and dying. God sent Jesus so that we would not die, just as He sent the bronze serpent so that Israel would not die. We *look on* Jesus, we *gaze on* Him, we *behold* Him, we *believe* Him, and we are not only healed but are born again as new creations, entirely new people with entirely new hearts and desires.

It’s a clear and true picture of what our lives will look like not only now during redemption but much more so in heaven to come. Our gazing in heaven will be complete, our new life will be final, and our knowing will be face to face! Gazing is a discipline for sure, but it is so much more than that. It will be our occupation in heaven for all time. Gazing is what we were made for. This is why it's helpful to spend so much time on this one topic. If you are not growing in the joy of gazing on God during everyday life, I really fear that you have not only missed the primary *means* of redemption, but that you have missed the *goal* of redemption as well. It is no coincidence that all evil desire itself will have faded away in heaven. Sinful desire cannot compete with a full, complete gaze on Jesus. I beg you to give yourself over to this gazing, to sacrifice what you need to in order to behold Jesus crucified and risen with your family in Christ often during everyday life.

- Does salvation make more sense now, seeing the background of John 3:16? In your own words, how does this episode in Numbers breathe life to what John 3:16 means?
- How can you envision your “commute” as this story from Numbers? What are the snakes that are biting you, poisoning you, and killing you? What does gazing on Jesus in desperation look like? What does healing look like? What does new life look like?

ACTION

1. Write out your own moment and moment redeemed. This should be a time that isn't so much an intense trial as it is an *ordinary, common* life situation in which you tend to walk godlessly. What do the sinful thoughts, fantasies, and longings look like in all their gory detail? Where is God particularly absent? What does the wake-up call look like as you realize how you've been thinking? How will you engage God and behold Him abruptly in the middle of the godlessness? What does repentance look like? What are the promises, scriptures, and stories that make God vivid? What do the new thoughts, fantasies, and desires look like? How do things spiral toward God and away from sin as you behold and fellowship with Him?
2. Practice each day this week what you've written out for that everyday situation. Begin to learn how to proactively take your thoughts captive not only when you're in a storm but also when things are normal or even easy. These ordinary times have more to say about how we handle storms than you think.
3. Pray with your friend from your community group about this daily situation in which you're striving to encounter God. Ask them what a similar situation looks like in their own life. Brainstorm together about what it can look like, how the fantasies in your head could be changed to glorify and enjoy God, and how the longings can be toward Him instead of without Him. Pray together for God's power to meet you in your striving to behold Him in the everyday.

¹ See A.W. Tozer, "The Pursuit of God."

² Hebrews 12:1-2

³ 1 Peter 1:13

⁴ Psalm 42:1

CHAPTER 8: LEVERAGING THE SANCTUARY

For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. (Romans 6:19)

Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17)

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:14)

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

You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works (James 2:22)

But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:13)

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. (2 Peter 1:5-9)

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

There will be a particularly large number of questions in this chapter. Don't let this overwhelm you because you don't need to dive into *all* of them now. This chapter is really about gearing you toward working through things effectively with your community group. Feel free to linger on the questions that seem the most impacting and save the rest to look at later.

ORGANISMS

There is a picture I want to place in your mind in order to glue these verses and this chapter together. First, *you are an organism*, not just biologically but spiritually. Second, *you are part of an organism*, not just socially but spiritually.

You are an organism. You are also part of an organism.

You cannot truly understand an organism by breaking it apart and looking at each piece separately. Nothing even looks all the separate when you dissect it either. A friend of mine, who has dissected cadavers, assures me that it's extremely tough to differentiate ligaments from the bones they attach, where one ends and the other begins. Bone, tendon, and muscle look continuous, like a single piece, and the separations are not as visible as diagrams make them out to be. It's similar with our thoughts, dreams, desires, and actions. Where does one begin and the other end? Can we really diagram them out so rigidly and pretend that they operate in isolation?

Even more, we collectively form a larger organism: the local church and the global Church. Our identity is inherently a *family* identity, and our redemption is inherently a *family* redemption. God made us to live connected to one another, and this gives us three main ways of living out redemption in our lives.

1. We remain in sin because we are suffocating apart from the body, refusing to use our spiritual gifts to bless the church body.
2. We grow together toward sin because none of us are individually beholding, trusting, and obeying God.
3. We grow together toward God because we are individually beholding and trusting God, and we are collectively building one another into the full stature of Christ.

NOTHING IS UNAFFECTED

In Romans 6, actions obeying lawlessness actually lead to further lawlessness, and actions obeying righteousness actually lead to sanctification. This shows our actions leading to real heart-level changes. Romans 10:17 introduces community to show how the actions of another (preaching the gospel to us) actually led to faith in our own hearts. Romans 13 commands us to deny forethought and care for the desires of the flesh. We plan and provide for godly desires in putting on Jesus's desires rather than sinful desires. This is real planning and real providing, not divorced of the real world. In James 1, a real-world stimulus entices, we latch on with real desires, we gratify those desires in real ways, we conceive sin in real-world action, and sin brings real-world death. In James 2, we see the unity of faith and works of faith – that the two cannot exist apart from one another. Also, works are not individual but communal: toward brothers and sisters. In Hebrews 3, real world, life-on-life reminding and exhorting actually helps cure our Romans 1 blindness and callousness. In 2 Peter 1, “doing” actually protects knowing God from being unfruitful, and it keeps the blinders off of our eyes. In Ephesians 4, we actually build one another up into Christ's full stature.

You and I affect one another through our individual and collective thoughts, desires, and actions either toward sin or toward Jesus. Not one part of this stands alone or unaffected. Your

thoughts this very moment will affect your desires later. Your fantasies and desires this very moment drive your thoughts and affect your actions. Your actions have tangible influence, either by God's power or sin's power, to affect your thoughts and desires later. We cannot pretend that gossiping about our boss has nothing to do with lustful fantasies later. That's not how organisms work, and that's not how we work as people. We cannot pretend that vegetating for hours in front of a television or living in godless anxieties have nothing to do with substance abuse later. But there is still more to it than that.

The sickest consequence of our sin is not just damage to our own hearts. It is how we damage God's mission to His body and to the world, how we suppress His glory from view by our unrighteousness. The next sickest consequence of our individual sin is that we do not serve one another in brotherly love. We need to view our sin and our lives in the context of the church, how we act as a vibrant and healthy body part. My lustful thoughts are the most damaging in that, having engaged them in fantasy all night, I am less able to encourage you with the gospel tomorrow. Likewise, the most beautiful consequence of me enjoying God by faith during my insomnia is that tomorrow, I have Spirit-fueled power to help you see God more clearly! The highest end of trust and obedience is that a glorious God is seen more clearly by more people.

We need to have this mindset in redemption. We grow together, and we decay together. In all of this, we are *together*. And so are our thoughts, fantasies, desires, and actions.

*We grow together, and
we decay together. In all
of this, we are together.*

- How does it reshape your view of redemption to see your thoughts, desires, and actions as parts of a single organism? How does it practically change what you do and how you approach things?
- How about viewing redemption as a family organism with the church community around you? How would you complete this thought: "I definitely would not have obeyed, except that someone else ..."?

LAWLESSNESS LEADING TO FURTHER LAWLESSNESS

Have you ever fought with someone very close to you, with perhaps a spouse or a roommate? What are these fights about? I think a good, general summary would be this: anger at not getting what you wanted. How do these fights typically go? You say, "I can't believe you did X. It's like you didn't even consider me." The other says, "I didn't consider you? You think the world revolves around you! What about Y?" Then you say, "That's nothing like X because ..." Then they say, "I'm sorry, did you not hear me? Do you not even care about Y, now? Does X just excuse it? And how can you be so insensitive?" Then you say, "I'm insensitive? You just blew me up the same way I did you! How am I worse now?" The argument progresses until it is ultimately about the argument itself, and the original point likely gets lost somewhere as well. Does this sound familiar? What is this madness?

It is lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, progressing, morphing, and intensifying as all sin does. This happens in the long term as well, as spouses grow bitter, as anger grows hardened, or as friends try to outdo one another in getting glory from others. Actions, desires,

and thoughts mingle and interact in a direction. In fact, people themselves mingle and interact together in a direction as well. Nothing stands alone or unaffected. At this point, you can throw any notion of “neutral” or “isolated” out the window. Life is a building cycle that never stands in neutral. Some call it spiraling, but perhaps that term is typically reserved for the really bad episodes. I want to convince you that everything in life is ultimately spiraling somewhere.

RIGHTEOUSNESS LEADING TO SANCTIFICATION

Have you ever had a conversation with someone you just met or barely know, and you come to find out that they love God too? Have you ever said, “I cannot believe how far God has brought me? When I was first saved, I thought I had ‘figured things out’ and decided God was better than everything else. But then I come to see that He revealed Himself to me when I was blind and least deserved it. He rescued me!” Then the other person says, “I know exactly what you mean! Here’s where I was when God first saved me. I was so oblivious, but I knew something had changed. I knew He was totally different than anyone I’ve ever known. I suddenly found myself wanting to know Him more.” You go back and forth for hours over your stories, about how God has intervened when you needed Him most, about where you didn’t see what He was doing, about when His word has changed your heart about stubborn things. By the end of it, you practically feel like your face is glowing like Moses’s after coming down from the mountain.

This is righteousness leading to sanctification, progressing, morphing, and intensifying as all obedience by faith does. This happens in the long term as well, as spouses grow more aware of their need for the Spirit, as thankfulness turns into a spring of praise, or as friends grow to owe each other a debt of love they are thrilled they cannot repay. Actions, desires, and thoughts mingle and interact in a direction. In fact, people themselves mingle and interact together in a direction as well.

I’m repeating the same language verbatim because sin is not the only bully on the block. God’s grace is far more powerful than sin. Remember the Colossians passage that envisions sin as a pathetic, limping, and defeated enemy being publicly embarrassed by Jesus as He disarmed the powers of darkness. Sin’s progressions toward hardenedness and ultimately death have no say at all against God’s overwhelming power toward redemption by the gospel message. If you respect sin, make sure you respect God’s power all the more.

GOD’S SOLO WORK

With all of this talk about works and striving, I think this is a good time to remember that all of redemption is really God’s work alone. All of our work rests securely under the umbrella of God’s solo rescue. It’s OK that it’s mysterious how all of this is true at the same time, but remember the two big fruits that God’s solo act is meant to give us. First, it moves our eyes off

of ourselves and onto the God we are wired to glorify, enjoy, and display. Second it gives us confidence because God cannot fail. We don’t need to know the biological complexities of a

If it's all God's work, then why strive hard? Because you can trust Him, and it's what He has told you to do!

strawberry to enjoy it. We don't need to know the complexities of sociology to enjoy the fellowship of another person. Likewise, we don't need to know the inner workings of thinking, imagining, desiring, and obeying in everyday life in order to live out the immeasurable grace of God's redemption. Our call is to trust and obey with all our might in everyday life where scripture reveals. We leave to God the otherwise impossible work of redemption.

So if it's all God's work, then why strive hard? Because you can trust Him, and it's what He has told you to do!

- The strong influence of *all* my mundane thoughts, desires, and actions can really put the pressure on. In your own words, how does redemption being God's solo act relieve this?
- Think about a time when you've experienced lawlessness leading to further lawlessness with someone in your life. What did it look like? How did things evolve and amplify?
- Think about a time when you've lived out righteousness leading to sanctification. What did that look like? How did things evolve and amplify?

SINS GO THROUGH PREGNANCY

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. (James 1:13-15)

Sin tends to seem like a big, single monster to most of us when we approach God's rescue in our lives. But, as the Holy Spirit illuminates God's depths to us through the Word, we begin to see the minefield of this world for what it is¹. In all fairness, to the lost, sin is and remains as a large monster but not for reasons we might think. The lost will read this and see a list of principles to apply to their lives. But principles do not save. A *Person* saves: a Person we think little of until He wakes our hearts from death to life. This chapter mainly looks at the real-life context of obedience and sin as led by scripture, but nothing has changed about our perpetual dependence on God's rescue! These are principles for sure, but they are principles rooted in a one-sided rescue by a compassionate and powerful God.

THE LURE: SIN'S SEED

Sin begins by a lure. The bait is thrown, and our hearts jolt with desire at the very sight of the lure. Is this a sin? When you see that body walk by and a first realization of desire springs up in your heart, have you sinned? When a memory of past abuse imposes itself on your mind because of a smell, a sound, or a view, and you immediately feel the sting of anger,

The instance of feeling temptation is not in and of itself sinful.

shame, and isolation come on you, have you sinned? Sure, our hearts are deceitful. Sure, we live with "defeated but not absent" sin in our hearts until Jesus comes again. But I don't think that at this moment we have committed an action that defames God, even in the heart. To be

approached by sin and be tempted by it is *not* the same as engaging sin, beginning the conversation with it, or taking steps to coddle and justify it. It is not the same as the second look or the brooding in thought and desire upon the lure. To look a second time on the body passing by, to entertain and engage godless thoughts of anger – this reveals sin in the heart, and it can happen quickly. But that instance of feeling temptation is not in and of itself sinful.

You need not be ashamed merely for having felt stung by another person's body or by the thought of alcohol. But it is right to *mourn* that you are enticed by it. We mourn the remaining presence of sin, even when we do not engage it. Sin means suffering, and we mourn it together with Christ. It should feel nauseating that self-pity and anger entice us so easily, even if we are not actively engaging it. We desperately want Jesus to return, at which point we will never feel that sting again! That mourning also has an outlet of rejoicing: one day soon, sin will lose meaning altogether. Praise God! I mean, think about that. Praise God that one day, that sting will never be felt again, and we won't have this war of killing sin. We will only know Jesus! It's another way to fix our gaze on heaven, our greatest hope.

BEFORE THE LURE IS CAST

The process begins before the lure is cast, though. It is not the view of another person's body that begins the progression of lust in our hearts. It is not the memory of abuse that begins the progression of anger. It is not the noticing of a number that could be fudged in the inventory that begins the progression of greed and theft. We are drawn away *by our own desires*, desires we've cultivated by tangible thought and action long before the lure was cast. Things happened *before* the lure was cast. We lived out our narratives in plenty of real detail with plenty of real influence on our hearts beforehand. This all gives vividness, potency, and color to that lure. The progression began the day we were born, through our unique sinful desires, our unique circumstances, and our unique choices. We fixate on single sins, single desires, and single moments in isolation to our detriment because they are all connected.

Think for a while about the "look" of your life *before* the enticing and drawing came. What were your typical thoughts, your typical fantasies and dreams, your typical engagements, your words to your spouse and children, your reaction to your friends' words to you, and your times with God *like*? Were you active or

What we do when the lure isn't cast has a lot to do with how we react when it is.

withdrawn? Were you passionate for God's glory or mostly uninterested? Was your heart embracing difficulty and taking a Godly refuge or shirking difficulty in irresponsibility and entertainment? Were you prayerful, infatuated, desperate, and vivid? Or were you more godless, placated, complacent, and foggy? What about disciplines of the Word? Were you cultivating truths with hard work, striving for first-hand treasures about God and meditating with pleasure and awe on the God they led you to? All of this detail isn't meant to give you a headache. Just take it slowly and go through your daily life with God and look at things on the ground level. Write it down. What we do when the lure isn't cast has a lot to do with how we react when the lure is cast.

The *real* beginning of the curse of Romans 1 was not active desire toward sin. It was the *absence* of God! The sickest and most damaging reality of sin is the absence of the God it displaces! The sin of omitting God from our lives and walking godlessly comes long before the

sin of committing actions that blatantly defame Him. I don't need to actively engage desires for a given sin in order to prime myself for falling into temptation. All I need to do is to forget God, and I am primed and ready for sin! Why else do we have the urgency of reminding one another *daily*?

What you do before the lure is cast matters. Do you believe that morning times and night watches of meditation are a *side issue* in your struggle? They are not, friend. They *are* the issue. Were you to be morally perfect from a worldly standpoint and yet did not long for God, you still wouldn't belong with Him in heaven because you are still not like Jesus, who was infatuated with Him above all else. Jesus gives us His mind and desires by the Holy Spirit who lives in us. With Jesus's mind and desires, we are able to love and enjoy God in *all* of life just like He does.

*All I need to do is to
forget God, and I am
primed and ready for sin!*

LIVING ON GOD'S MISSION IS HOW WE DISARM THE LURE

How do we walk watchfully without constant anxiety, suspicion, and fear? How do we live out our command to walk "circumspectly" without a constant fear of missing something and "doing it wrong?" I mean, we really are talking about a ton of detail here. This could lead us to constantly be looking over our shoulders, scared we're not doing something just right or leaving something out. I want to address this the same way a friend addressed my own fears in leadership: *your infatuation with God's glory must outweigh your fears of doing something wrong*. If you find yourself walking with constant anxieties, take that as a red flag that your gaze is currently on sin, not on God. The remedy is to become re-infatuated with the beauty of God. In that, you are no longer striving out of a fear of missing something. Instead, you are striving out of an exhilaration of what your detailed thoughts, desires, and actions can actually *do*: that, by God's power, they really do make Him more clear to you and those around you.

*Your infatuation with God's
glory must outweigh your fears
of doing something wrong.*

We must learn to belittle sin as the side issue that it is. Tossing aside our hindrances as the mere cumbersome excesses that they are, we pursue with abandon the God from whom sin is really just a distraction². And that's how we view sin: a worthless distraction. We take Peter's departing words with

*We prepare for temptation
by actively enjoying the life
we were saved to live.*

weightiness, and we *practice* the grace that makes us *partakers* in God's divine nature. We practice stirring one another up by way of reminder³. We practice thankfulness. We practice awe. We practice meditating on God. We practice planning for obedience. We practice dreaming over what grace really means for everyday life, not just for ourselves but for those around us as well. We practice brotherly love: serving, spurring, reminding, exhorting, and rejoicing. We live in and engage the Godly desires that oppose and put down sin.

We engage a real, present God in our daily lives; and out of this, the moment of luring is robbed of much of its power. Temptation will still sting painfully, leading us to mourn the reality of sin still residing in our hearts for now. But we have another taste in our mouths at the

moment of luring, which will breed a strong distaste for sin and desperation for God. We prepare for temptation, to stand under it, by actively enjoying the life we were saved to live. We prepare by living actively on God's mission, which is why the next chapter is the last chapter. The two are one goal: preparation for temptation is wrapped in mission as we live as infatuated spreaders of God. Running hard after God is the same as robbing sin of its luring power. As we strive, our focus belongs on the God who stands at the finish line. Our longing for Him is all we need to see sin as the mere annoying hindrance that it is, to belittle it as garbage altogether, and to just toss it aside in order to run all the harder toward Jesus, who puts us in awe.

To live on God's mission, to live out the lives we were saved for, is exactly how we fight the power of temptation and disarm idols. This view is so important! As a new creature, with my new desires, I now live and breathe to know God more deeply, and this is ever my drive and infatuation. And in this drive and infatuation alone is sin revealed as the hideous, lying, life-destroying, God-defaming crap that it really is. Only in this drive and infatuation can I truly *hate* sin like I was made to hate sin, the way God hates sin. I hate sin because of the beauty of the God it separates me from. Sin loses its lure as I live ever more deeply in the grace of the cross, in the rich taste of God's glory I can finally enjoy with Jesus. Sin loses its lure as I live the life I was saved to live, by living actively on God's mission. There is no other way.

*I hate sin because of
the beauty of the God
it separates me from.*

BEHOLDING: SIN'S CONCEPTION

So the lure is cast. Beholding is where the progression moves next. We behold sin in our thoughts and our imagination. We lift the lure up before our eyes, actively engaging it, thinking about it in real-life detail, and fantasizing about it. At this point, we're already in sin, even if it hasn't come out in obvious action. Already, we're beginning to become more blind and calloused against God. It's helpful to feel this effect as the Holy Spirit reveals it to us, to sense when God is less clear. In beholding, we begin a conversation with the lure rather than hating it, resisting it, and drawing near to God. We engage it, consider it, ponder it, dream about it, and coddle it. Often, we think this is safe because nobody sees it, but those who trust idols become like them. So we are changing already as we behold idols.

As we fight a particular sin that we haven't fought very much, it can be tough to distinguish the moment we're being lured from the moment we begin to behold sin. Having become so practiced at beholding that sin in such vivid detail, it can be almost automatic. But, again, real-life practicalities really do matter. The longer you behold it in your mind, that stronger the lure becomes. The longer that conversation goes on and distracts your gaze from God's sanctuary, the weaker your view of God becomes. Nothing stands alone in redemption.

*Real-life practicalities matter.
The longer you behold the
lure in your mind, that
stronger the lure becomes.*

What is particularly important about beholding is that when we behold, we lift up sin for our desires to gaze on, grow toward, and latch onto. Beholding builds desires when it comes to sin, just like it does when it comes to God.

DESIRING: SIN'S GROWTH

As we behold sin in our fantasies and thoughts, we grow stronger desires for sin. Our desires become more potent, more creative, more trapping, and more practiced as we behold sin. At this point, we are in real danger. We've not only begun the conversation with sin at this point, but we are becoming intimate with it, getting to know it, and linking arms with it. Desires are real and not abstract. As we say things like "If I could only..." and "That is just so..." either in our minds or out of mouths, we are stretching out with real desires for real things. Desires are things we can identify. We can actually put our finger on it and say, "Yes, I desired that, and this is what it looked like." We brood in desires for sin in the same way we get lost in fantasies about sin.

We coddle and nurture these desires, and we even sometimes engage in godless therapeutic advice like mourning the loss of sin as if it were a "buddy." I've been there. I've even taught that before. So I can tell you first-hand that it is dangerous and unbiblical. We ought to mourn sin's presence, not its absence. We see sin as a treasure and not as God-defaming trash that's out to suffocate us. This is largely because our beholding and desires are now focused on sin and not on God, so we begin to lose sight of Him. As desires grow, they are like rudders to a large ship.

Desires are like rudders to a large ship. Though small, they determine where we go.

They may seem small and innocuous, but they determine where we go and what we do. We do precisely what we *want* to do. So as our desires change, we change, and what we do changes. Desires live in connection with thoughts, beholding, and actions, but they are also something distinct we can see in our daily lives.

ACTIONS: SIN'S BIRTH

As we feel the pull of real-life lure toward sin, as we behold sin in real-life imaginations, and as we stretch out for it with real-life desires, the rudder is steadily moving us into real-life action. When we act, when we fail to love a brother, when we lash out at a sister, when we burst out in anger, when we act out in pornography, or when we abuse a substance – sin is now birthed. It has given birth to tangible "acting out," and it has become the monster we look at and often wonder, "How in the world did this happen? Why am I doing this?" But in reality, a lot of things were involved. They are real-world, identifiable things that we really do, and they are things we can recognize.

WE ENGAGE SIN AND RIGHTEOUSNESS IN SIMILAR WAYS

For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. (Romans 6:19)

This is one of the most applicable, ground level helps I know of in scripture. We might think: *I have no idea how to “do obedience.” Where do I even start?* If I could paraphrase the text above and its context: “You actually *do* know how to serve God because you’ve been spent your whole life serving sin. But now, God has freed you from slavery to sin. Now that you serve God, it looks very similar to how you served sin.”

I like to use similar language for sin and for righteousness to help remind you that we do sin and we do righteousness in remarkably similar ways. Each have immense power: one to mask and defame God, and the other even more so to reveal and spread God; one toward death eternal, and the other even more so toward life

*We do sin and we do
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remarkably similar ways.*

eternal. They both have real masters controlling us, and they both accomplish a mission. We might think we don’t know how to stir ourselves up by way of reminder in Christ, but we do it *constantly*. Did you go on Amazon or EBay and browse? Did you think up porn you’ve seen before? Did you look at your calendar anxiously? Did you browse the Little Debbie aisle? Did you stare at yourself in the mirror? Did you stir restlessly about your career goals? Did you think up your spouse’s wrongs? Then you stirred yourself up by way of reminder. Look at how you do it with sin. Righteousness will not look too different, but it will have more power for a vastly different purpose: putting God on display to yourself and others.

Sin progresses. It has moments and a history. It lives and breathes in preparation, enticing, and engaging in thought, desire, and doing. It is a really good practice to take time and think about how sin lives and breathes in your own life in the everyday. What is its history? What have things looked like in the past to pave the way for your reaction to the lure? What does the enticing look like (when and where)? Is it at night when you have the computer to yourself? Is it after work on your way home? Is it when the kids are screaming? Is it during the holidays? What provisions and forethought do you make? What imaginations do you play in your head to stir it up? How do other people affect you in all of these? Do they feed your sin, or do they confront it? What does the “doing” of sin look like with your hands and mouth? Do you blow up at someone? Do you fixate on yourself in the mirror? Do you grumble? Do you watch peoples’ bodies? Do you fornicate? Do you forsake responsibilities? Do you isolate from community? Do you vegetate in front of television? Do you spend money you do not have?

Really think about the progression of sin in your life. How does it live and breathe from its history and preparation to its culmination in the more grievous acts that first brought you here? Sin goes through a process of pregnancy. It doesn’t just “pop up” any more than a woman drops a baby while taking a walk and says, “Oops, where did that come from?” By the Spirit’s illumination, you really can see how this pregnancy moves from history to enticing to forethought to desire to action and back again. It is not a confusing or cloudy pregnancy. It is a clear pregnancy. What is that pregnancy in your life, and how does it progress in the details? How do you move in your thoughts and desires from one thing to the next? How does it live in your actions and your planning? How does it live in the context of community, with others?

SIN INTERRUPTED

Now I want you to lift your eyes to the reality that no circumstance, however we may have prepared in sin, however difficult, however overwhelming, can ever make even one of God's promises untrue at any time to any extent. His promises are firm, and they hold through any situation. Even right smack in the middle of fornication or even in the middle of a wild rage of anger, God's promises are *still* not robbed of their power. You can have the needle in your arm, and you can turn and repent immediately, refusing to engage sin further and running to engage God. No circumstance places you beyond the ability to repent right this very moment and run in trust toward God for mercy and grace to change. Just as grace is no license to sin but is power to love, this promise is not license to ignore God's early wake-up calls. No, it is power to obey *now* and not later. This is, in fact, how we live our lives, though it should not be as grievous as I just described. Quick, frequent, deep repentance is the interruption of sin's pregnancy and the imposing of righteousness in order to kill sin right this very moment. It is what marks the lifestyle of the saved. Repent boldly, quickly, deeply, and often. Don't try to "save face," but empty your hands, dump your justifications, and run to a cross we can neither earn nor forfeit.

No circumstance can ever make even one of God's promises untrue at any time to any extent.

Don't buy into the God-belittling excuses of ingrained patterns in the brain and turning a titanic around. For sure, redemption *on the whole* really is progressive and takes time. But in the moment, reality is quite different. You have the power available to you to repent *fully right now*. You have all you need for life and godliness *now*. You have Jesus who justified you

Repentance is your window of escape from ungodliness. You can do it right now, and a minute from now as well.

and raised you to new life, the Spirit living in you actively and guiding you, Jesus pleading for you right now, the Father's plan for you moving sovereignly, and the Word with the Spirit to reveal Him clearly to you. You have this now and not just later. Will we despise God's power? Will we belittle it and not revere it with weightiness? The power to interrupt sin in the moment, no matter how much momentum sin may have, is here available for us fully. There is always a way out. We are still never given an amount of temptation that can overwhelm God's grace that gives us a window of escape right this moment. Repentance is your window of escape from ungodliness. Don't wait and do it later. You can do it right now, and a minute from now as well.

THREE THINGS TO EMPHASIZE

I'd like to emphasize three things for this section. First, letting sin progress is *damaging*. It's no small thing to let sin move from lure to beholding, from beholding to desiring, and from desiring to doing. Allowing sin to progress increases the power and wreckage of sin's God-eclipsing mission, and it makes it more difficult for us to fight sin.

Second, we really can and must repent *now*, whenever "now" happens to be, no matter where sin is in its progression of lure, beholding, desiring, or doing. You cannot really trap sin in your mind and nip it in the bud there. Don't be naive. It's *already* in your beholding, desires, and actions. We fight sin everywhere we find it.

Third, righteousness lives and progresses in *similar ways* to sin: we are lured to God by real-world gospel encounters, we behold God in the gospel in real thoughts and mental movies, we desire God through the gospel by stretching out with real longings, and we obey God through the gospel with real actions. Righteousness is an organism that progresses too, and scripture assures us that it is a lot more powerful than sin. That gives us incredible hope and assurance as we reorder our lives to obey God in our everyday beholding, desiring, and acting. Therefore, trusting God's power through simple things, reorder your life, and obey!

- What thoughts do you tend to have when you walk in the flesh? How do your thoughts change when you're walking in the Spirit?
- What are your cries of "if only" when you're walking in the flesh? How about when you're walking in the Spirit?
- How do you find yourself occupying your time in action when you're in the flesh? What kinds of things do you find yourself doing when you're walking in the Spirit?
- Looking at how you engage sin as you worship idols in the flesh, how does that speak to how you can better worship God in more tangible ways? Does it expose areas where you are not worshipping God as vibrantly or as actively? What do those look like?

RIGHTEOUSNESS KILLING SIN

No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:9-10)

GOD'S SEED: RIGHTEOUSNESS CONCEIVED

We handled in-the-moment repentance in mind and heart in the examples of the last chapter, showing examples of moving from sin's insanity to righteousness' Godward infatuation and rest. This is the product of living in God's sanctuary. Apart from beholding, we rarely have vivid faith to lay hold of God's promises in the moment like that. What I want to get to here is the longer-term role of *works of faith* that spring out of God's sanctuary. Take a look at the scripture above. It's an interesting way to say things, isn't it? We *cannot* just keep on practicing sin like nothing happened. If we do, then we reveal that we are not yet saved.

WHAT IF GOD'S SEED DOESN'T LIVE IN ME YET?

Seeing that we are not yet saved is not a call to lose hope but rather a call to run to God in faith, trusting in His gospel! It is a grace to realize that you're not yet a child of God, if you really are not. You're hearing a gospel that not everyone even gets to hear! As Romans 10 puts it, faith comes from hearing the gospel. And you now know that God *did* send someone to you so that you would hear the gospel. He's giving you a very rare grace, friend. Take that grace, and run to Him! The call is to trust Him right this moment. Get to *know* this God, who He really

is. He saves *all* who trust Him, so please relent from fear and pride, and throw yourself on the grace of Jesus's cross that atones for every last person who trusts Him, no matter what their past is. If you believe you may not be a child of God right now, the very fact that you're hearing the gospel in this book is meant to *draw you near* to God to trust Him, not to push you further from Him. Please behold who God really is. What kind of God would slaughter the one He loves more than anything or anyone in the universe for people who don't want Him? Please get to know God. He's calling you to trust Him. It doesn't take cleaning up your life to be saved. It takes seeing God as He really is, enjoying Him, and trusting Him. He does the cleaning. Pray, and ask Him to save you and show Himself to you.

A SEED THAT ABIDES

God's seed *abides* in those who are His, and this seed grows and bears fruit. It's the absence of tangible, real-life righteousness and the unchecked thriving of sin that reveal to us that we are not God's. But look in your life for signs of grace that His seed in you is producing fruit. Perhaps you used to not care much about sin or only hated it to the extent that it made you feel looked down on by others. But now you hate sin because of how it separates God from you and from others. That is a fruit of God's seed, so be encouraged! Perhaps you used to be separated from those in your church, but now you feel pain when you see your brother or sister suffering. That is fruit of God's seed living in you! No, we do not perfectly practice righteousness now, but its seed has clear evidence in our heart and life, and it *will* choke out sin as it grows more and more fruitful. It *will* steal sunlight from sin, overcome the vines of sin, and put sin down. This is what a seed does if it abides, and God *makes* it abide until the end for us.

A SEED THAT SUFFOCATES SIN

SHOPPING ADDICTION

Where in your life can you work out this seed that God works in you and makes to abide in you? Think about where in your life sin is being practiced, and think about how righteousness will begin to suffocate it out in that same place in your life. Did you go on Amazon and browse endlessly the things you could buy with money you may or may not have? Stop spending money and labor on what does not satisfy (Isaiah 55). Take God at His word, go to the word, and browse new treasures. And please don't consider that to be corny. It's literal and true. Didn't Jesus say that God's rule is a treasure so valuable that a man sold every last thing he had to buy the field that held that treasure? Friend, open your hands. Stop grasping for control of pleasure by your own means, and treasure Jesus! *He* is a pleasure! Get off of Amazon, and buy the field to spend your life on Jesus, gazing on Him with joy and awe!

PORNOGRAPHY ADDICTION

Did you used to plan how to watch porn at night so nobody would see it or how to go by the adult store after work by getting off work early so your family didn't find out? Then expose this to your spouse and to your friend, and plan how you might be more accountable, more communal, and less secretive with your life. Plan how to starve that out. Even more so, plan how you might go through a devotional with your spouse at night. Fantasize over scenarios of

God being lifted up instead of your glory. Plan for how you might get off work early to get a coffee with your brother or sister and come home with vibrant faith and face shining to show God's glory to your family. You do not just stop sin. You start obedience. Only obedience of faith will choke out sin.

You do not just stop sin. You start obedience. Only obedience of faith will choke out sin.

SOCIAL ANXIETY

Did you used to isolate in your house, genuinely afraid to go in public places for fear of what people might think of you? Did you mold your life around not having to interact with people? Then, meditating on the safety of the cross and what that means for the lack of safety of the world around you. Meditating on Psalm 46, and begin to place yourself in uncomfortable situations without endlessly working on your appearance and your social skills. Put yourself by faith into situations of God's mission to those around you and get practiced at failing, being thought little of, and being shamed. With your community, praise God aloud for how Jesus was also shamed, and get your hands to the work of obeying by faith where you used to disobey by unbelief. Craft your life around obedience and communing with Jesus by sharing in His desires and actions. Do it because you trust an open-handed Father, who *delights* in you as if you'd lived Jesus's life. Do it because you're safe in Jesus's embrace and identity.

SIN MUST BE UPROOTED BY RIGHTEOUSNESS

Sin needs to stop. Active obedience needs to take its place. Redemption isn't *only* desires and thoughts. It's actions as well. Use your body to glorify God. This is a creative place for you, your community, and the Holy Spirit to craft. How can Godward desires implement themselves in real action in your own life to displace sin and kill it? Instead of looking at yourself in the mirror, you can join a friend and muse on God for a while, beholding God's might, lure, and brilliance in what He's done in the past. Instead of glorying in the bodies of yourself and others in pornography and masturbation, you can glory in God's patience with a brother or sister. Instead of imagining yourself being praised and getting bitter when someone else is praised instead, you can sing praises to God with images in your head of all nations surrounding Jesus, singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God almighty!" Instead of fishing for compliments or bragging, you can belittle pride by making little of yourself to the lost and exposing where you are weak but God is strong in conversations. It's fun to embarrass the power of sin with the power of God in everyday life, to exercise our rule over sin with Jesus and watch it happen. Enjoy watching how much righteousness overwhelms the power of sin in you.

KILLING SIN IN ITS OWN BACK YARD

When you were in sin, you meditated and mused on sin. In that, you made sure to do it as often as you could. You gave forethought, you made provision, you nurtured actively, and you sought every situation you could think of to further its mission. You did this in real life. We really can learn a lot from how we pursued sin. Now, you are in Christ, and you meditate and

muse on Him. In that, let the desires have their fruit. They live out in real life in exactly the same places we used to disobey because of sinful desires.

Righteousness planted in one field doesn't choke out sin in another. It sits in the same field. Exactly where you used to *do* sin is where you need to be *doing* righteousness. Rages of anger at your spouse need to be choked out *in place* by vocal thankfulness for

*Righteousness planted in one field
doesn't choke out sin in another.*

We kill sin where it lives.

Jesus's atonement for you both. It needs to happen in the same context, or you're fooling yourself in that particular area. The way forward in the moment is to *repent* immediately when you realize you're in sin. In that, we surely look like idiots, but we get the privilege of looking like fools *with Jesus*. We repent and turn visibly away from sin's mission and toward God's mission right then and there. It's tough, but this is what righteousness choking out sin looks like.

ANGER IN MARRIAGE

I've had times when I've been angry at my wife, and we'll be in a heated argument. I say hurtful things and justify myself in defensiveness. I load accusations on her and craft the arguments with a lot of thought and passion. And suddenly the Spirit shows me what I'm doing. Do you know how *humiliating* repentance in that situation is? I hope you do because this is the train wreck you should expect when repentance ruins sin's mission and you react *quickly* to seeing sin in your life. It's beautiful because it lifts up God and decreases us so that people can see Him unobstructed through us. That kind of repentance looks extremely awkward, and even unbelievers instinctively know it's not natural. It weirds people out and takes them off guard. My best reaction in those moments of anger is to stop, repent aloud, apologize aloud, look awkward, and begin to lead us in a time of beholding the gospel that reconciles us both to God. Righteousness goes on tangible mission in the exact same places that sin used to be on mission. It is against sin right where sin lives. Righteousness is powerful, and it takes no prisoners. It is also joyful and restful.

- What are some examples of "sin's back yard" in your own life? How do you envision awkward looking repentance taking place right then and there?

LEAVING REDEMPTION IN GOD'S HANDS

Are you confused about redemption? Are you overwhelmed? Then let's get back to the work of everyday obedience by faith and leave to God the grand work of heart change. Be about the work of looking at where sin and disbelief are active in your life. Be detailed. Now, with the Spirit, creatively look at what tangible actions of obedience you can pursue in those *exact same times and contexts*. Have a plan, provide for it, and do it trusting the God who is with you. What will it look like? How will you do it? What promises or attributes of God will fuel you? These are things you do with your family in Christ. Exchange ideas, exchange struggles, expose, confess, and draw near to God together. Talk about how it's going. Warn one another. Encourage one another. Point one another.

Finally, begin to *do* the things you plan: faith and works working together as righteousness leads to sanctification. When we get too heady about trying to figure out grand things, we can begin to suffocate. This is usually because (1) our attention is distracted from God and (2) we begin to act as though rescue depends on us. A good remedy for this is to return to the ground level details of your life, behold God as He is, and trust Him to accomplish the otherwise impossible things.

WHEN THINGS DON'T SEEM TO BE WORKING

I want to end this chapter by recapping some sentiments I think we all relate to: *I feel like I'm never going to gain any ground on this sin, as hard as I might try. Why can't I desire God like I want to? Why can't God just take away my sinful desires in an instant the way He woke me to salvation? He's sovereign, right? Why do desires still haunt me? Why are things going so slowly? What do I do?* A brother came to me with these questions recently, and I really appreciated the rawness of it. I bet you'll be asking a lot of these again when you're in community group in the future. I know I've asked all of these questions myself, far more even, and I've wrestled a long time with them. It's helpful to re-wrestle through them from time to time.

HOW IS CHANGE GOING TO HAPPEN?

Take a moment and re-read Exodus 14. We might ask, isn't God sovereign? Then what about my actions? Yes, God is sovereign, and He ultimately does all the work and all the fighting. That is exactly why He gets all the glory. And this leaves us with only one good motivation to strive: because we can *trust* God, and He commands it. In our work, impossibly powerful things happen because God does them. We need to get our heads out of the clouds of trying to figure out what God has not revealed and into the Bible to be pointed to a real Person we can *trust*. We need to remember simple trust and simple obedience. God is sovereign indeed, and as we obediently hold up sticks by faith like Moses, He fights for us!

WHY WON'T THIS SIN BUDGE?

Perhaps you feel like you aren't making any progress in redemption because your sinful desires are still strong in an area you're tired of fighting. It might be a good idea to look hard at your life in light of the Word to see where *else* you may not be trusting and obeying God. Are you living godlessly? If so, where? Are you beholding God faithfully, often, and deeply? Are you laboring in the Word and other proactive disciplines you were saved to enjoy? Are you encountering the God you discover as you read about Him? Are you actively engaging community? Are you listening to correction? Are you continuing in sin in other areas of your life? With your spouse? At work? With your kids? With your church? Are you engaging God's mission to spread His fame to the ends of the Earth, or has your mission returned to merely "stop sinning?"

We often say: "God, I trust You in this area so that You'll do what I want You to do here. But I don't trust You in this other area that I deem less important or unrelated." When we ignore God because we don't directly see something beneficial for us in that obedience, we

don't actually trust Him, not in that area anyway. You may be fixating only on a few seemingly dominant issues in your life and forsaking real-life trust and obedience in many other areas. Our call is to trust God and to obey Him *fully*. In that, we watch the Lord do impossible things and fight for us. It may not be as direct as we'd like to think. I doubt holding up a stick was Moses's best idea of how to get across an impassable sea. You may be trying very hard, but in only one area of your life.

Scripture's exhortation is to trust God. Stop trying to pretend you know precisely how God is working, and don't think you can muster up the work all on your own. Also, don't think you're beyond the ground-level commands of scripture. We *all* need them. He calls you to behold Him, trust Him, and obey Him in all areas of your life. He alone accomplishes redemption for you, and you can trust Him to leave it in His capable hands. Are you striving to trust and obey God in areas seemingly unrelated to your struggle? Will you leave redemption at large to His hands and get to the work He's set for you because you trust Him as a good Shepherd for His people? Often, our frustration expresses a lack of effort on our part, and that lack of effort usually exposes a belief that God will not actually do the impossible for us. Get to know Him, how He always comes through for His people. Knowing Him, do what He commands.

REDEMPTION DOESN'T MEAN EASE

Often, desires are stubborn, things seem to go slowly, and things continue to be pressing for quite a while. We feel like redemption isn't really going on, that it has stalled out. Maybe it has, but maybe it *hasn't*. It really depends on how we view redemption. Pressing circumstances are often the breeding ground of our deepest growth in knowing God. God *can* remove our sinful desires immediately, and yet He often chooses not to. Steadfastness has an effect, and we are commanded to let it have its full effect. You can trust God when things are very difficult, when desires hang around and continue to press, when you're sick of fighting. You can trust and obey when the heat is on, and this is actually redemption at its deepest! Don't forget the *grit* of redemption, that it is intended to press us. Amazing things really are happening in those circumstances, so wait patiently in trusting God's final defeat of sin on your behalf, and enjoy His progressive defeat here and now. He purposefully allows things to hang around in difficulty to humble us and move our eyes to Himself alone, shaking us of false hopes, and purifying us from idols. This is His grace, and we know His stance is *for* us and not against us, no matter what. So rest in Him!

WHAT DO I ACTUALLY *DO*?

Leave rescue in God's hands, period. Resting in that, put your mind, heart, and hands to the daily hard work of beholding Him, trusting Him, and obeying Him in real, everyday life. God calls us to do real things for real reasons, so we need to stop thinking that we know better than He does, or that we are beyond His commands. He is trustworthy, and that alone is enough to fuel our striving. *He* will do the rescue. You can trust Him because the one who calls you is faithful, and He *will* do it!⁴

- In your own words, what does it look like to rest and leave the grand work of redemption to God's hands? How does that shape the way you strive?

ACTION

- Identify one area in your life where you are habitually acting out sinfully. More importantly, also identify areas where you are habitually not pursuing God in simple faith and simple obedience. Do this with the input of at least one person in your community group. Ask them what they see in your life. The closer they are to you, the more they will see that you don't. It's a great thing.

- Look around this sin in your daily life:

- Identify godless thoughts, beholding, and fantasies. What tends to occupy your mind in the times leading up to that sin?
- Identify your longings and desires. What are the cries of "if only" you catch yourself saying in times leading up to that sin?
- Identify what you are actually *doing* in times leading up to that sin. What occupies your actions?

- Plan out how you will proactively pursue God in real, ground-level life. Think about the Word, your thoughts, fantasies, community, and actions. Where has God called you to real obedience, and how can you plan that out? Pursuing simple, practical obedience of faith is the most important planning you can do. Consistent, "small" acts of obedience of faith make amazing changes in our hearts by God's power. Enjoy the disciplines because of the God who works through them and what He's promising to do. It automatically roots out and kills sin because you're proactively living as you were saved to live. As a few examples:

- Tomorrow morning before work, I will read James 1:1-10, ask God to help me see Him better, and figure out at least one thing that changes about my day.
- During lunch, when I tend to think grumbling thoughts, I plan to think about how Jesus delighted in the Father's plan of the cross because He trusted Him.
- I'm going to call my friend and set up a time to grab a coffee and talk about life. I plan to ask them how God is delighting them and what is challenging them.
- On Thursdays, my workload is really heavy, so I will plan to meditate on how Jesus embraces His bride, even when she is undeserving. Then, on my commute home, I will use this as fuel to engage my wife instead of checking out.

- Plan out repentance in the same times you typically find yourself in godless thoughts, fantasies, and desires. Collect some realities about God from the Word that tend to be really vivid for you to help occupy your mind with Godward fantasies and thoughts. Perhaps even write them down and carry them with you. Pray through what those longings will be like as you move from beholding and longing for sin to beholding and longing for God in those moments.

- Pray both individually and with your community group for God to show up in these times, to make Himself vivid and beautiful for you, to expose sin for the filth that it is by comparison, to change your longings in those times, and to show up powerfully when you would otherwise sin.
- Act by repenting hard, quickly, and often, with grit and trust, with all your might, not only in the times you typically find yourself acting out in sin, but also in the times you tend to walk godlessly in your mind and in your heart. Repent during things that even seem unrelated, yet you know are not glorifying God. Enjoy God often and deeply as the fruit of frequent, deep repentance. Let repentance have its intended end: a deep satisfaction in a trustworthy God.

¹ The section “Sins go through pregnancy” conveys a number of concepts taken from John Owen’s “Mortification of Sin.”

² Hebrews 12:1

³ 2 Peter 1

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 5:24

CHAPTER 9: A RESCUE THAT SPREADS

True rescue from sin by the gospel means our greatest joy and deepest desires have fundamentally changed and are changing further still. Longing for God alone, enjoying Him above all things, and being united with Jesus mean that we will have the same primary passion as Jesus does: to spread the Father's

display to the ends of the Earth. This chapter is about your desire and longing to join God's mission and what that says about your rescue. You will need to dig in the Word to get a better idea of how to actually go about this mission with your community. But the most important thing is to first ensure your heart has the same longings as God's.

Our sickness, sin, began and lives in the absence of God's glory from our eyes and hearts. Being blind ourselves, we lived as people who further blinded others as we lifted up ourselves and things in creation to eclipse God from the world around us. Our rescue began and lives in the renewal of God's display to new eyes and new hearts that enjoy and trust the God they finally see. Now seeing, we live as people who show God to others in the gospel we speak and the gospel we live, lifting veils for many. God being eclipsed brought us death, and now God being shown off brings us life. His display is our greatest good. How good it is, then, that this is also *His* mission: to glorify Himself and spread His display to all nations of the Earth! This is the single broadest theme we see in the Bible. It is for His glory and also inherently for our good. The two are one and the same.

God's rescue is a *spreading* rescue. It cannot be anything else. A new heart finally sees God's glory in the gospel, delighting in Him above all things. The heart cannot help but display what it treasures most, and its greatest delight and treasure is increasingly God Himself. A rescue that does not spread is no rescue at all because

that would reveal that the heart does not, in fact, treasure Jesus above all things. If you find yourself resistant to what God is doing throughout all time here on Earth to spread His fame, the reason is that you are not seeing and treasuring Jesus. And the call of scripture if you're feeling this way is to behold Him again, to taste and see that He is good. Your passion to join God on His mission is a meter for His rescue in your life. Having no passion for His mission indicates that sin is gaining a foothold in your heart. It's a red flag to warn you that you are in danger. It is meant to draw you to repentance.

The most important thing is to first ensure your heart has the same longings as God's.

Your passion to join God on His mission is a meter for His rescue in your life.

GOD'S ENDEAVOR TO DISPLAY HIMSELF

Genesis tells us that we were created to image forth the God who made us, and this was evidently important enough for the narrative to repeat it, I believe, six times: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion.' [...] So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Four of those directly call us His images, one shows how we image Him in our dominion over creation, and the last shows how we image Him in unity of male and female in marriage

(as He is a united trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). It was only at this point that creation was *very* good. Clearly, from the start, it was extremely important to God that we should display Him. This is His purpose for us. It also happens to deeply satisfy us.

God's purpose for us is to display Him. This also happens to deeply satisfy us.

Now, notice the very first command God gave to humans: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion.” His first command is to *spread* out as people who display God and to have a dominion over creation that is by definition like His own dominion. We are created to be fellow laborers with God, working with Him to joyfully display Him. And His very next statement to mankind is to display Himself as a liberal giver: “Behold, I have given you.” This, no doubt, should color the nature of our dominion over creation. We image a generous Giver, and therefore we ourselves are to be generous givers. Does it sound like something new in Exodus 19 and 1 Peter 2, when we are called: “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” This is a return to Eden, redeeming us to our original calling: spreading imagers of God! It is a redemption earned for us by Jesus Christ, who obeyed where we, under sin’s captivity, could not obey.

Consider Adam and Eve, who wanted to replace and compete with God instead of displaying Him. Consider Babel who did not spread and did not image God but clustered together and endeavored to counter God’s mission by displaying only themselves. Consider Abraham who was *sent out* to be a blessing to all families of the Earth. Consider Joseph through whom God spread His fame not only to all of Egypt but to all nations surrounding Egypt. Indeed, God’s grace through Joseph set Egypt up as an image of God’s providing nature. How ironic it is that Egypt so quickly became an image of our oppression under sin! Through Moses, God spread His fame much further to every nation that had ever heard of Egypt. And God is not at all quiet or hidden about His goals. His goal is that people would know who He is: His power, His justice, His anger at sin, His compassion, His distinction for His people, ultimately His Son’s atonement for His people. God has been spreading His fame throughout history, and He is doing the same today through you and me as a church.

GOD’S DISPLAY IS INTIMATELY TIED TO OUR RESCUE

The letter from Paul to the Romans, which communicates the gospel of our rescue so clearly, uses an alarming amount of “display” language. Opening the letter, we see that Paul was sent for God’s gospel to cause obedience of faith *for God’s name’s sake among all nations*, including the reader who is assumed to be in that group. The context of the reader’s rescue is God sending out the gospel to cause trust and obedience for His name’s sake in all nations. You and I are included in this, but it is not primarily about *us*. It is about His name among the nations, specifically through trust and obedience.

Moving further into Romans 1, we see why Paul is not ashamed of the gospel he preaches. It is God’s power to save all who believe. Even more, God’s righteousness is *revealed* in this gospel. We move on to read words like revealed, suppress, known, plain, shown, perceived, and knew. The beginning reason for God’s wrath in Romans 1 was our refusal to

honor and acknowledge Him in preference for suppressing His display. We move on to see language of eclipse, being veiled from Him. Our minds were made futile, our hearts made darkened, our wills made foolish and vain. Further still, God's display is masked from us by images of creation, by peoples' bodies, ultimately by ourselves. In a very real way, under sin, we ourselves image creation: the idols we worship. We lift up our sick treasures and display them in word and deed. We are filled with a host of sins in this display, and we become people quite unlike God.

In Romans 2 and 3, we find that all people are trapped under sin, and all alike desperately need rescue from bitter captivity. Then again, in the latter part of chapter 3, Paul returns to display language. But now, God's righteousness is *manifested* in Jesus for all who believe the gospel. God *puts forward* Jesus to *show* His righteousness both in the past and in the present. And we immediately see the question: So what about our boasting? It is excluded! God's rescue happens as He is displayed, and its goal is that He *alone* would be lifted up. There is no boasting in ourselves or in other people but in God alone. There is to be no more eclipsing God. The next stop I would like to take a look at is in Romans 10 where we see God being displayed in all the Earth to those who did not seek Him by sending people to preach the gospel. We are rescued from sin, and in that rescue, we are sent to display Him by preaching the gospel.

Finally, after many words proclaiming the details of this gospel and the sort of life it brings about, Paul closes with:

"Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith -- to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen." (Romans 16:25-27)

Again, notice the display language. You could track through most of scripture and see similar thoughts. Particularly in Ephesians, we see perhaps most clearly the complete undoing of the curse of eclipse in Romans 1 as Paul prays for the Ephesians "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you."

God's mission to display Himself in the gospel is what rescues us. His display and our rescue are inseparable. Jesus calls Himself the serpent in the desert (alluding to the book of Numbers) that must be lifted up, and all who gaze on Him would live and not die. He took the form of our curse (a serpent), becoming a curse on our behalf as He died on the cross to absorb on Himself what we earned in our sin. He is lifted up (the gospel preached by those sent out into the world), and all who gaze on Him (trust Him) will live (have eternal life and know the Father). Our rescue is tied to gazing on Jesus as He is displayed to needy eyes. Not only that, but all who are saved by God through us preaching the gospel are rescued in exactly the same way. God's rescue is a *spreading* rescue.

*God's display and our
rescue are inseparable.*

A CALL TO JOIN GOD'S MISSION

Our rescue is a rescue from treasuring idols to treasuring Jesus, from beholding the idols displayed to us to beholding Jesus displayed to us, from displaying idols to those around us to displaying Jesus to those around us. Our rescue is an inherent part of God's mission. We are rescued in the context of God's mission, and we are rescued to join God's mission. What we will do for eternity is join other rescued ones from every nation on Earth to behold and praise a God who is finally lifted up before us face to face. Our enjoyment of Him here and pleasure in displaying Him now will grow into our final joy in heaven. Jesus's command to *go* into all nations, making disciples, is not an optional end for a select few of those He rescues. Joining His mission to display Himself in the gospel is the very purpose of rescue. It is what we are rescued *into*.

In Jesus's rescue, may you behold, trust, and obey God to joyfully spread Him through preaching the gospel deeply and broadly in word and action, despite all suffering, to the ends of the Earth!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- If you knew you could not fail and had every resource imaginable at your fingertips, how would go about glorifying God?
- What is it about God that excites you the most?
- If you had to name just one thing in your city that you most long to see redeemed, what would that be?
- If you had to choose just one category of people to see become softhearted lovers of Jesus, who would they be?
- What most bothers you about your church, and how would you like to see that changed?
- What most delights you about your church, and how would you like to see that amplified?
- When you get to heaven, what will be your favorite thing to praise God for? What are you most excited to thank Him for when you see Him face to face?

ACTION

The discussion questions are all meant to probe your heart for God's mission to the church, to Knoxville, and to the world. My hope is that you expand on them and develop them with your community group. With that, enjoy deep fellowship with your community group, and enjoy pursuing God's mission with them!

APPENDIX 1: PRACTICAL MATTERS

You may find the curriculum lacking so far in some of the traditional advice typically found in these types of ministries. We have spent loads of time encountering God in the grand themes of life and in the everyday of life, but what about practical wisdom in things that are not as directly Godward so-to-speak? Well, I will stick to my guns that every action really can and should be overtly Godward, but I know the gist of this question. What about porn filters, not staying up late, abstinence, forgiveness, accountability, etc.? This practical advice is extremely helpful, but I've chosen to be light on this for two reasons.

First, beholding, knowing, engaging, desiring, and spreading the person God Himself really is important enough to warrant the focus it has been given. With Him, we can be lacking much practical advice and still live out His rescue with incredible power albeit maybe in a more cumbersome way. Without Him, though, we can have all the everyday advice in the world and still be woefully ill equipped to fulfill our callings as joyful, obedient spreaders of God. The many nuances of rescue and specific wisdoms are important. They really are. But they live in a context we need to know well. They live in the middle of God's rescue, and they work themselves out in the presence of God. Most practicalities can be either godless and damaging or Godward and rich, depending on how we live them out. An accountability filter can seem to kill pornography while actually exalting and amplifying fear of man. Or it can be a helpful separation and coming into the light for someone longing to escape the hardening deceitfulness of sin. And the sole difference between these situations is the *context* in which we apply the filter. All practical wisdom must be saturated with God's glory, or it is at worst God-defaming and damaging and at best useless.

All practical wisdom must be saturated with God's glory, or it is at worst God-defaming and damaging and at best useless.

Second, practical matters could consume volumes because the nuances of our struggles against sin are so incredibly varied. No two people are alike, no two people sin alike, and no two people will have identical looking rescues. What is practically helpful for one person is often of very little use to another person. One person may have a natural shame about someone seeing them look up something online, and they might not be all that computer savvy. For them, an accountability program will be a good way to separate them from pornography. Another person might know their way around computers pretty well, or perhaps they have no natural shame about pornography, caring little for who knows what. For them, accountability filters are useless. I don't want to spend too much of your time on things that may not apply to you. We should realize the value of practical wisdom accrued even from non-gospel sources, as we live those things out in a God-saturated context. Still, ultimately the scriptures, God's very words, must *script* our rescue in the practical matters, reforming and shaping what we learn from unbiblical sources.

Most people in Knoxville, not all but most, already seem to have many ideas of some things they can *do*. But so very few come to know the real God, to grow deep longings for Him above all things. That's why the "doing" never seems to actually happen. You really can change from a worldly perspective using a 12-step-type process. Many people do this all the time,

shifting from one idol in creation to another, all the while remaining apart from God. But to move from longing for things in creation to belittling everything on Earth in light of a genuine, powerful longing for God alone – this, neither process nor drug will do for you. You need a real God to work real power into your real troubles in real life.

You need a real God to work real power into your real troubles in real life.

You need rescue, and your rescue is a Person: Jesus Christ. For sure, there are processes at work. For sure, there are principles living in this rescue. But we lose everything if we divorce these things from the God we are meant to encounter, behold, enjoy, trust, and obey.

ABSTINENCE

Will you go periods of time without sinning? Yes and amen! But this is not the same as what we mean by abstinence. In abstinence, we fix our eyes on “not sin.” We fixate on the absence of sin. Perhaps it’s on a number: the amount of time we have gone without acting

For the believer, abstinence is a byproduct of an insatiable longing to know God more intimately.

out. Isn’t this an odd focus when you really think about it? What kind of hope is *that*? We wage this epic battle against sin, but what exactly happens when the battle is over? What lies on the other side of victory if our goal is “not sin?” Maybe a successful life? A decent job? A family? Self-esteem? I won’t lie. I’m not sure any of this is enough to lure me out of my own addictions. If that makes me weak, then praise be to God, who is strong in my weakness! Going without sin for the Christian has a goal, and that goal is a Person. For the believer, abstinence is a byproduct of an insatiable longing to know God more intimately. It happens on the way to a beautiful goal, a guaranteed end already fought for and purchased for us by Jesus.

I am far more encouraged to hear you say that you feel more deeply in love with God and see Him more clearly than to hear you say you haven’t acted out in ten days. Don’t misunderstand me. I’m glad if you haven’t acted out in ten days. But if you haven’t done so *with* a clearer view of God and *for* a clearer view of God, then I fear you’re probably striving out of wrong motivations. Nothing thrills my heart like hearing someone say, “I just feel like I know who God is now, like He’s really showing up for me when I used to walk godlessly, and I love Him more than I ever have.” That gets me going! Abstinence in and of itself? Not so much.

That being said, abstinence from sin is essential for the believer because our actions do not stand apart from our faith. Sin, expressed through real actions, really does harden our hearts in deceitful ways we cannot possibly uncover outside community. We sin, we harden, and we quickly become blind to both realities, relying on another to remind us daily, so long as it is called today, of the gospel that continues to save us. Obedience, expressed through real actions, really does enlighten our hearts to know God more clearly, enjoy Him more profoundly, and trust Him more securely. If your thoughts obsess over a person, you really do need distance from them. If they obsess over a substance, you really do need distance from it. The scales need to fall off, and feeling needs to return. And we do this for a real and compelling reason: to know God more intimately. We take the commands and warnings of scripture seriously.

TRIGGERS

Have you ever heard of H.A.L.T.? It stands for Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired; and when you're in one of those modes, the acronym is intended to get you to stop what you're doing and think about why your mind and desires might be going so wacky in the moment. Each of those situations is a common "trigger" that begins a progression that eventually leads to "acting out." I'm not going to knock it because I think it's surprisingly useful. Don't stay up so late. Don't spiral in your anger, and learn how to deescalate your emotions. Don't let loneliness trap you so easily. Eat a Snickers bar, and drink a glass of water. Go for a run. It's amazing what that can do for the mood. Recognizing the difficulty and making a wise choice is a good thing. You'll find after altering your circumstance that the trapping thought loosens its grip a bit. You'll find yourself thinking a little bit more sanely.

But there are three problems when this is *all* we have. First, we aren't trying to change only behavior. We're out to kill sinful *desires* themselves and see desires for God rise up in their place. Second, the reality is that you can be perfectly well fed, well rested, unfrustrated, and socialized, and you can still be fully infested with sin. Likely the only thing you've accomplished with H.A.L.T. *alone* is sin that looks more socially acceptable. But even "pretty" sin eclipses our view of God and hardens our hearts against Him in ugly, covert ways. Third, this does not sound like the Bible: "In easy circumstances, obey God." There are plenty of stressors outside of H.A.L.T. that will get to you, and you won't always recognize them. If you have kids, I needn't say any more. If our *hopes* lie in controlling circumstances, we will be frustrated and unfruitful indeed! Repentance is our true way out.

When you recognize a trigger for your life, take that as an opportunity to prepare by building an arsenal of trust and intimacy with God for those times. When you know a trigger is coming, or when you recognize one has already happened, this is a time to run to God with abandon and nothing to bring to the table and, as Isaiah says, feast at His table though you have no money to buy. Knowing when the war is at its most intense is helpful.

OUTLETS AND REDIRECTIONS

Then there are times when we avoid the trigger, when we find non-sinful ways of redirecting ourselves and taking outlets that turn down the pressure valve of intensity. When you're struggling with a desire to engage pornography online or from the stores of your mind, exercise is an absolute *Godsend*! When you're feeling the chemical pull toward a substance, when that pull threatens to hijack your mind, and when your desires for it are screaming, grabbing a coffee with a friend is a huge help. When that suffering pierces you out of nowhere, and you begin to feel trapped in fear or anger, doing something tangible with your hands like art, building something, cleaning, and so on can be a great release from the impending insanity. I have no doubt whatsoever that God, in fact, intended hard work to alleviate the mind of many ills. I have no doubt He designed physical exercise to release happy chemicals that lift the call of anxiety for a bit. We can (1) enjoy these things with God, or (2) attempt to replace God with them. What we do *after* taking an outlet says all we need to know. Do we walk godlessly and selfishly now that we feel OK and aren't pressed, or do we take the easier circumstance and enjoy God all the more?

We do things for real reasons, and the reasons matter. My advice is to take God's common grace opportunities to lessen the pressure towards sin and then to *leverage* the lessened pressure for the purpose of pursuing God all the more. Take the non-sinful release valve and run to your Savior to know Him more deeply.

Enjoy the outlet with Him present with you, recalling who He is and building greater and more secure joy in His gospel of the cross. If you rely on running to get you out of trouble, you have gained very little. But if you leverage the release to pursue God – in His Word, in close prayer, in praise, in conversations with friends – you gain so much! The goal isn't to cease a behavior or an emotion. The goal is to know a real God who changes desires and behaviors alike.

Leverage the reduced difficulty for the purpose of pursuing God all the more.

THOUGHT LIFE

"It's all just a battlefield of the mind. What you think defines you. If you think you'll lose, you will. If you think you'll win, you will. Your thoughts make you or break you. You must say to yourself, 'I am a successful person. I am a winner.'" You'll find some form of this in

any self-help book or guide to a more successful you. It breaks my heart that you'll also find it in many books that claim to glorify God. The reality is, though, that thoughts really are quite powerful. God created them, and we exercise them for His glory or for our own. But I'll tell you this: they were not created to be geared mostly toward yourself, nor were they created to be mostly inward. Thoughts were created to engage a God so complex that He will keep them busy and intrigued forever. They were meant to chew on who He is while in His very presence. If you leverage thoughts toward a more successful you, be careful lest you actually succeed in that effort to eclipse God from yourself and others! The only biblical end goal of our thoughts is a more glorified Jesus, not a more successful me! We delight in visions of *Jesus* on the pedestal, not ourselves.

The only biblical end goal of our thoughts is a more glorified Jesus, not a more successful me!

"For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace" (Romans 8:5-6). Yes, thoughts are powerful, so don't waste them on yourself. Exhaust

them all for the eternal God for whom they were made. The Spirit searches the depths of God to reveal Him powerfully to us (1 Corinthians 2), so it is obvious where our thoughts will reside when we walk with the Spirit. In fact, we have a promise: life and peace. Eternal life is to know the Father. Peace is to be His friend and not his enemy. Both of these were won for us by Jesus's rescue, by His sacrifice on the cross. Our mind is to be set to who He is, to enjoy Him and know Him deeply. This is gospel power lived out in our thought life. It is essential for the

Thoughts are powerful, so don't waste them on yourself. Exhaust them all for the eternal God they were made for.

believer. Be careful when you find your thoughts absent from God. Take it as an opportunity for quick repentance, and rejoin them with Him quickly.

ACCOUNTABILITY

This word pops up in every nook and cranny of church and support group cultures alike. Accountability has its uses, and you do need it. But you need to know what it truly is and what it truly does so that you don't rely on it for something it cannot give you. Accountability, as most of us think about it, is an external *diagnosis* of how things are going. You go around the table with confession about how the week has been. But suppose you had an ugly week. What exactly are the others going to do about it? This is the limit of accountability. It is a great diagnosis and nothing more.

If accountability stands alone, we inevitably resort to some form of scolding one another when someone has a bad week and praising one another for a good week. Accountability puts external sensors on an internal problem. It's like placing seismographs to determine if an earthquake has happened. Does it do anything at all to remedy or prevent the earthquake? Neither does accountability by itself. Left alone, it can become like Jesus's example of a tomb that's been painted white. Things feel better managed, but inside, the rot of death still consumes you. Accountability cannot heal the problems it reveals. So as you form accountability partnerships or groups, make sure that you also skillfully apply the gospel to ground-level issues and pray for one another. Remember that the real work is God's, and we change as we see Him.

APPENDIX 2: PUTTING SCRIPTURE INTO PRACTICE

Suffering well, joy in heaven, & obedience 1 Peter 1:1-12 1 Peter 1:13-25	How Jesus's grace overwhelms suffering Romans 5:1-11 Romans 8:31-39	Idolatry destroys us and changes us Psalm 115 Jeremiah 2:1-13 Isaiah 44 James 1:13-15
God's presence, help, and pleasures Psalm 139 Psalm 63 Psalm 46	God will keep us and complete us Colossians 3:1-4 Philippians 1:1-11 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24	God gave us over to sin / God gave Jesus over to death in order to rescue us from sin Romans 1:18-2:1 Romans 4:24-25
Captivity in sin & Jesus's rescue from sin Romans 1:1-17 Romans 1:18-2:1 Romans 3:9-31	Trials are God's grace to us James 1:1-8 James 1:9-18 Romans 5:1-5	Trusting God in the face of death Daniel 3 Luke 22:39-46
Gazing on Jesus & enduring discipline Hebrews 12:1-2 Hebrews 12:3-11	Created to be with and gaze on God Hebrews 4:14-16 Jeremiah 2:1-13 Ephesians 1:1-10 Ephesians 1:11-14 Ephesians 1:15-23 Exodus 19:1-6	Trusting God in the face of severe hunger Exodus 16:1-8 Matthew 4:1-11
Righteousness is a gift through faith Genesis 15 Romans 4 Galatians 3:1-6 James 2:18-26	Heaven is our home, our hope in suffering 1 Peter 1:8-13 Romans 8:18-25 1 John 2:15-17 Revelation 19:6-10 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 Revelation 22:1-5	Jesus loves and glorifies the Father John 4:31-38 John 5:19-28 John 12:27-30 John 14:1-14 John 17
God rescues His people for Himself Exodus 3 Exodus 6:1-13 Exodus 12 Exodus 13 Exodus 14 Exodus 15 Exodus 16 Exodus 17 Exodus 19 1 Peter 2:1-12	God is gracious during temptation & trial 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 2 Corinthians 12:7-10	God always destroys sinful "trees" Daniel 4:4-18 John 15:1-11 Luke 13:1-9 Matthew 7:15-20
Creation, God's provision, & our distrust Genesis 1 Genesis 2 Genesis 3	God's punishes our injustices severely Psalm 10 2 Peter 2:1-10 Genesis 6 Revelation 21:1-8	Enjoy God's presence deeply and often Hebrews 10:19-25 Psalm 63
Jesus became our curse & gave us blessing Isaiah 53 1 Peter 2:18-25 Romans 4:13-25 Romans 3:21-26 Romans 8:1-8 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 Romans 6:1-12 Colossians 2:8-15	God always accomplishes his purposes Isaiah 46 Job 23	Gush over God and behold Him often Psalm 1:1-2 Colossians 3:1-4 Philippians 4:4-9 Romans 8:5-8
Holy Spirit reveals, sustains, & changes us 2 Peter 1:1-4 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 John 16:5-11 Galatians 3:1-5	God takes no pleasure when the wicked die Ezekiel 18:19-24 Ezekiel 33:10-11	Think on God very often during daily life Psalm 119:145-152 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22 Deuteronomy 6:1-9
	Humility during trial / Job points to Jesus Job 38 Job 39 Job 40 Job 41 Job 42	We're rescued as we gaze on Jesus, who became our curse and killed it Numbers 21:1-9 John 3:1-21 2 Corinthians 5:21

Faith, actions, and desires are all connected / We are connected as a body	It's all about God's fame in all the Earth	You died with Jesus, so put sin to death
Romans 6:19-23 Romans 10:14-21 Romans 13:11-14 James 1:14-15 James 2:18-26 Hebrews 3:12-19 2 Peter 1:3-15 Ephesians 4:15-16	Romans 1:1-7 Romans 16:25-27	Colossians 3:1-11
God's seed uproots sin in our lives		Our work is really God's work / Striving has a motivation, a purpose, and a context
1 John 3:1-10 1 John 3:11-24		Philippians 2:1-13
		Expect trials & trust a faithful God
		1 Peter 4:12-19
		Walk relationally with the Holy Spirit
		Galatians 5:16-26
		Raw honesty with God & finding tough answers in His presence
		Psalm 73
		We sin solely because of our evil desires
		Romans 7:7-12