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Introduction

Many years ago, the Holy Spirit began nudging me—gently at first, then with increasing clarity—toward a way of helping people, young and old alike, to truly listen. To hear beyond the surface, to untangle the web of lies they’ve come to believe, and ultimately, to point them to Jesus. That persistent urging, that quiet insistence of the Spirit, eventually took shape as what we now call the Hot Seat Model—or, as some prefer, the Table of Decision.

In recent years, both within and beyond the Village Church, people have encouraged me to put this into writing—to create something tangible, something others could pick up and use in their own churches and communities. Therapists have asked for it. Pastors, Villagers, and, most persistently, my own mother have all urged me on. So, in 2023, Susan and I carved out time to write. We sat with Jill Sommitz on multiple occasions, brainstorming, refining, and finding our way forward.

Through that process, it became clear: before this could be a book, it had to be taught. And not just anywhere—it needed to be worked out in the very place where it was born and shaped. So, together, during Lent, we will explore it in our community through a sermon series. Alongside that, a Lenten meditation booklet—something to hold in your hands, to read, to wrestle with, and to reflect on.

Purpose

This particular Lenten meditation is meant to serve as a companion to our sermon series on the Hot Seat. But more than that, it may well be the first step toward a book—one that lays out the ideas and principles of the model in a way that helps you not only understand the Gospel more deeply but also apply it to your everyday life.

Before we begin, let me take a moment to explain the intention of the Hot Seat and why I believe it is such an effective process for all of us. At its core, this model is not just about personal reflection; it is about transformation. It is a way of sitting in the tension between what we believe and what is actually true, between our fears and God’s promises, between the lies we’ve internalized and the voice of Jesus calling us forward.

Much of my thinking has been shaped by the work of Dr. Larry Crabb and Dr. Dan Allender. I could say a great deal about why, but for now, I’ll put it simply: they both understand that much of what burdens people—much of what they carry into a counselor’s office—can and should be addressed within the life of a church that truly grasps the Gospel. When a community understands not only what Jesus has done but how His work speaks into the struggles of everyday life, real healing begins to take place. This conviction is woven into the fabric of the Village, and it undergirds the Hot Seat/Table of Decision model.

Now, to be clear, the model is not a one-size-fits-all solution. It is not a shortcut to sanctification, nor a replacement for wise counsel. But it is a simple, powerful tool that helps us do three essential things:

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1. **Wait on Jesus**—not as passive resignation, but as an active, willful positioning of ourselves beside Him, anticipating His movement in our lives. "Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!" (Psalm 27:14).
2. **Hold fast to our identity in the Kingdom**—to see ourselves as God sees us, rather than through the distorted lens of our fears and failures. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17).
3. **Seek to repair what sin has broken**—to take seriously the ruptures in our relationships, acknowledging the ways our sin has wounded others and pursuing reconciliation. "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24).

This is the work before us. It is slow work, sometimes painful, but always necessary. And in the end, it is the kind of work that draws us nearer to Jesus, to one another, and to the deep, abiding joy of life in the Kingdom.

Lent

I love Lent. I didn't grow up in a church that practiced it, and fasting or following the church calendar wasn't even on my radar. That changed in the mid-90s when a mentor, Mark Brians, introduced me to the season. He wanted to integrate Lenten practices into our college ministry, and from that point on, I've embraced some form of it each year. When Pastor Rod and I finally had a space of our own at The Village, we made Lent part of our shared rhythm—first through Ash Wednesday, and in recent years, with Good Friday as well.

What draws me to Lent, year after year, is how it resets my life. For forty days, I step into a fast—not just removing something, but creating space. Space to confess sin. Space to pray for others. Space to prepare my heart to celebrate the resurrection. In a world humming with distraction, information overload, and the relentless pull of anxiety, it is good—essential, even—to stop with intention, to reorient myself toward Jesus, the cross, and the empty tomb.

Christians have been doing this for centuries. The practice of a pre-Easter fast reaches back to the earliest days of the church. By the fourth century, Lent had become a 40-day journey of repentance and preparation, inspired by Jesus' time in the wilderness. Over time, it shaped the rhythms of believers around the world—monks keeping strict fasts, entire communities pausing their normal routines to pray, give, and refocus. While the specifics of Lenten practices have changed across history, the heart remains the same: stepping away from the noise to draw near to Christ.

This year, the **Hot Seat Model** offers us a fitting way to enter into Lent together. It is a practice of honesty, vulnerability, and deep reflection—exactly the kind of thing that allows the Spirit to do real work in us. As we step into this season, may we allow Lent to do what it has always done: make room for God to move.

A Short Overview of the Hot Seat/Table of Decision Model:

(Best read alongside the Table of Decision Diagram)

The Table of Decision

The Table of Decision is where we find ourselves in those pivotal moments when emotions surge, and we, often unknowingly, face a choice: will we carry the familiar yet destructive yoke of the enemy, or will we reject it and walk under the yoke of Jesus? Though each of us encounters this table multiple times throughout the week, we rarely recognize the crossroads before us. The goal of this process is to develop awareness—learning to identify these moments, recognize emerging feelings, and discern the beliefs they reveal. With this awareness, we can slow down our reactions and choose wise, new ways of responding.

Practicing the Table of Decision in a Group

A small group can engage in the Table of Decision process by focusing on one person at a time. This can be done by having volunteers share, rotating turns, or designating a participant for each session. The selected individual, referred to as the participant, shares their experience while the rest of the group facilitates their process.

While verbal discussions are possible, many groups find it helpful to take notes on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper. This visual aid helps track insights and categorize elements—such as emotions, justifications, and false beliefs—as they arise.

Identifying an Event

The process begins by identifying an event that triggered negative emotions or led to a regrettable response. Each of us encounters these situations frequently—perhaps a moment when someone cut us off in traffic, causing irrational anger, or a text message that sent us spiraling into anxiety.

Focusing on a single, recent event keeps the conversation relevant and prevents unnecessary dredging into the past. The participant briefly shares what happened, and group members may ask clarifying questions to gain a fuller picture. At this stage, the goal is simply to understand what occurred, not to analyze motives or assign blame.

If the participant struggles to pinpoint an event, helpful questions might include:

- When did you start feeling this way?
- What was happening at the time?
- Is there a recent example of this emotion or behavior escalating?

Recognizing Negative Emotions

Once an event has been identified, we ask: *When that happened, how did you feel?* Responses may include emotions such as anger, frustration, anxiety, sadness, or more complex experiences like helplessness. If needed, group members may gently suggest possible emotions: *“It sounds like you might have been experiencing shame. Does that resonate?”*

Participants may also express thoughts as if they were feelings (e.g., *“I felt like he was trying to take advantage of me”*). In such cases, helpful questions include:

- *“Do you tend to believe that people take advantage of you?”* (which may reveal a false belief)
- *“What emotion did you feel when this happened?”* (which clarifies the experience)

Since emotions manifest physically, we also ask: *How did you feel this in your body?* Responses might include tightness in the chest, heat in the face, or a headache. These physical sensations serve as tangible markers of internal processes and can be recognized in future moments as signals that we’ve reached the Table of Decision.

Identifying False Beliefs

Each of us holds false beliefs about ourselves, God, and others that undermine the Gospel. These beliefs are connected to our negative emotions. Some examples include:

- *I am worthless.*
- *I will never amount to anything because of my learning disability.*
- *God is out there but isn’t interested in me.*
- *God is disappointed in me.*
- *People will always use me.*
- *My spouse is insensitive and will never change.*

False beliefs feel true, making them burdensome. If they were, in fact, true, our circumstances would be dire. Because they seem so real, we instinctively seek relief from the emotions they provoke.

To locate false beliefs, we ask:

- *When you felt this way, what were you believing about yourself?*
- *Where did you perceive God to be in this moment?*
- *What does this event suggest to you about other people?*

Some participants may identify beliefs in all three categories (self, God, others), while others may only pinpoint one or two. If no more emerge, it’s fine to move forward—additional beliefs often surface later.

The Enemy's Side of the Table

Affirming False Beliefs

False beliefs are often reinforced through repeated experiences, creating deeply ingrained patterns. These beliefs do not develop in isolation—they are shaped by past events and continually affirmed through life's challenges. To explore how a participant's false beliefs have been affirmed, we ask:

- *Can you think of another time you felt this way?*
- *Does this belief seem to come up repeatedly in your life?*
- *Where else have you seen this pattern play out?*

Recognizing these recurring patterns helps participants understand the roots of their struggles. However, we must be careful not to get lost in a long story—this step is simply about recognizing that the same false beliefs have influenced various moments in life. Once we see these patterns, we can begin to break free from them.

Noticing the Cycle of Relief

Our internal responses to events happen rapidly. If we don't challenge our false beliefs, we instinctively fall into habitual patterns seeking relief. This is the old way of life, governed by the enemy's yoke.

We ask: *What did you do next?* Relief-seeking actions can vary widely, from seemingly positive behaviors to overtly destructive ones:

- *I cleaned my house.*
- *I scrolled through social media.*
- *I called my dad repeatedly.*
- *I obsessed over the issue for days.*
- *I bought a car.*
- *I yelled at my spouse.*
- *I drank a bottle of wine.*

Some relief actions may appear healthy, such as calling a friend for prayer. If a participant describes a godly response, we note it in the *Life in the Kingdom* section and return to it later.

Justifying the Relief

Relief behaviors often arise from selfish motives, and we naturally justify them. To explore this, we ask:

- *What thoughts convinced you this was okay?*
- *What did you tell yourself to justify your actions?*

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Examples of justifications include:

- “*Nobody else is going to do it!*”
- “*It’s the only way I can get them to listen.*”

Justifications may also reveal additional false beliefs that require attention.

Meeting Jesus at the Table: Applying the Gospel

Thus far, we’ve examined what is—the event, emotions, beliefs, and relief-seeking behaviors. Now, we turn toward what could be. We shift our posture from analysis to encountering Jesus at the Table of Decision.

Goals vs. Desires (Crossing the Table)

As Larry Crabb explains in *Encouragement: The Key to Caring*, goals and desires function differently:

- *A goal* is a commitment within our control.
- *A desire* is something we want but cannot guarantee, as it depends on others.

When negative emotions lead to self-centered choices, it often stems from turning a legitimate desire into an unrealistic goal. To identify this, we ask: *What was your goal?* or *What were you demanding?*

The Jesus Side of the Table

Reframing the Story

The Gospel is the story of Jesus, and our discipleship begins by seeing our own experiences through its lens. Scripture reinterprets our story, centering it on Jesus. Passages that resonate—whether from the Gospels, Old Testament, or recent personal study—can offer clarity and guidance.

Embracing Identity in Christ

Faith in Jesus grants us a new identity (John 1, Ephesians 1). We are adopted into God’s family, given the Holy Spirit, and called to live as priests. This identity frees us from false narratives that contradict the Gospel and empowers us to walk in truth.

Living in the Kingdom

Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom of God had come through Him. This Kingdom turns worldly values upside down—self-sacrificial love replaces self-protection. Secure in God’s love, we no longer need to fight for control. Instead, we are free to love and serve as Christ did.

A Life of Worship

As Romans 12:1-2 says, embracing the Gospel transforms our actions into worship. When we reject false beliefs, align with our identity in Christ, and walk in the reality of God's Kingdom, we learn to love God and others in tangible ways.

At the Table of Decision, we choose which yoke we will carry. May we increasingly choose the light and easy yoke of Jesus, who leads us into freedom and life.

Before You Begin: A Note on This Lenten Devotional

Lent is a season of reckoning. A time to reflect, to recalibrate, to return. It calls us to slow down, to pay attention—to God, to ourselves, to the way we move through the world. These meditations are written with that purpose in mind. They are not a rigid roadmap, nor a step-by-step guide. Instead, they aim to unsettle—not to leave you lost, but to lower your defenses, to soften the places that resist change, to create space for honesty and grace.

At the heart of these reflections is a simple but searching question: What vision of God is shaping your reality? How do you experience life? How do you engage with others? These devotions are meant to stir that awareness, to help you see what is often overlooked, to bring into focus what truly matters.

But this is no passive exercise. It is an invitation—an urging—to be challenged, to be formed, to be drawn ever nearer to Jesus and his redemptive work. Not just in your own life, but in the world he came to restore. So, take these reflections seriously. Sit with them. Let them press in. Give them time to do their work.

Though these devotions draw on the principles of the Table of Decision model, they do not follow a structured sequence, nor do they require familiarity with the Hot Seat process. That choice was intentional. With limited time, I needed to simplify. More importantly, I wanted these reflections to be accessible beyond the Village Community—to anyone willing to engage, to anyone ready to listen.

Pastor Eric

Chapter 1

An Inward Look

Day 1: A Journey of Self-Discovery

Lent invites us into a season of reflection, a time to pause and examine the direction of our hearts. Growth in our spiritual lives is not accidental; it requires intentionality, a willingness to be examined. The Psalmist's words in Psalm 139:23 set the tone: *"Examine me, O God, and understand the depths of my heart! Test me and unveil the nature of my thoughts!"* This is where the journey begins—by asking God to reveal what is hidden within us. It is an act of trust, an acknowledgment that we are not yet who we are meant to be, but that transformation is possible.

The process of self-examination can be unsettling, even mysterious. It requires a desire to see clearly and a willingness to confront what is uncovered. True spiritual growth does not come from striving harder but from discerning where God is at work in our lives. What if the path to maturity is not about fixing ourselves but about recognizing where God is already shaping us?

Reflective Questions:

1. Where in your life do you sense the gentle yet persistent hand of God calling you to pay attention—to see with fresh eyes what He is already unveiling?
2. When you hear the invitation for God to examine your heart, do you respond with trust, or do you find yourself hesitating? What does that hesitation reveal about your understanding of His love and purposes?

Deeper Reflection:

- What is one deep-seated assumption about yourself—perhaps a script you have long lived by—that may not be aligned with the story God is telling in you? What might it mean to let Him rewrite that narrative?

Day 2: The Practice of Discernment

Spiritual growth isn't just about knowing what to do—it's about learning to listen. Neurobiologist and author Dr. Curt Thompson, in his books and lectures, reminds us that discernment, which he defines as paying attention to our inner lives, helps us better hear and understand God's voice. Too often, we seek clarity through logic alone, relying on our minds to map out the next steps rather than sitting in the discomfort of not knowing. But what if discernment isn't so much about finding answers as it is about listening well?

The practice of discernment requires slowing down, creating space to notice what is happening within us. The noise of the world is constant—demands, distractions, endless information. Lent offers us the opportunity to quiet those voices and tune into something deeper. What if God's

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voice is not absent but simply harder to hear because of all the other voices we allow to speak first?

Reflective Questions:

1. Instead of merely seeking clarity, what might it look like to cultivate a posture of attentiveness—one that expects to hear God not just in obvious ways, but in the quiet, the uncertain, even the ordinary?
2. When Jesus spoke of having “ears to hear,” He implied that some voices must be tuned out in order to hear rightly. What voices—whether cultural, internal, or habitual—might be shaping your discernment more than God’s?

Deeper Question:

- If discernment is not just about gaining insight but about being transformed, what patterns of thought or emotion have you been avoiding?
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Day 3: The Impact of Our Environment

Where we live, work, and spend our time profoundly shapes our souls. Our surroundings have the power to nurture creativity, intimacy, and connection, or to breed monotony, isolation, and discouragement. The COVID-19 era revealed just how much our physical spaces influence us. Many found themselves confined in homes that felt more like prisons than places of peace. Others discovered new rhythms of stillness and reflection.

Dan Allender reminds us that our stories are shaped in the context of other stories. This means that our environments are more than just backdrops; they are formative. As we seek to grow spiritually, we must ask: do the spaces we inhabit reflect the kind of life we long to live? Does our environment encourage us toward wholeness, or does it add to the chaos?

Reflective Questions:

1. In what ways does your environment either reinforce or challenge your understanding of God’s presence in your daily life?
2. How might the spaces you inhabit—whether by choice or circumstance—be shaping your imagination, your affections, and your capacity to love God and others?
3. If the renewal of all things has already begun in Jesus, what small yet intentional changes could you make in your environment to reflect the coming kingdom?

Deeper Reflection:

- What does the way you structure and tend to your physical space reveal about your deepest longings, your sense of identity, and your trust in God’s provision?

Day 4: Caring for Our Bodies

Our spiritual lives are deeply connected to our physical lives. We are not just souls trapped in bodies—we are embodied beings, created by God with purpose. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians, "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit?" This means that how we care for our bodies is not just a matter of physical health, but of spiritual stewardship.

Jordan Peterson offers this challenge: "Treat yourself as if you were someone that you are responsible for helping." Many of us extend grace to others but are harsh with ourselves. We push our bodies beyond their limits, ignore their need for rest, or treat them with neglect rather than care. What if honoring our bodies was an act of worship?

Reflective Questions:

1. When you consider your body, do you see it as part of God's good creation, fearfully and wonderfully made, or as something to be managed, controlled, or even resented? How does your answer shape the way you live?
2. If your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, what might it look like to practice a kind of stewardship that reflects both gratitude and responsibility? Where might you need to realign your habits with this vision?

Deeper Reflection:

- If Jesus, in His resurrection, affirmed the goodness of the body by being raised in one, what does that mean for how you treat your own? What does your attitude toward your body reveal about how you understand God's ongoing work of redemption in your life?

Day 5: First Sunday of Lent

We are now five days into Lent. For some, the season of fasting and self-reflection began with a sense of purpose, even enthusiasm. For others, it may already feel like a struggle, a slow withdrawal from comforts that have quietly shaped our daily rhythms.

I will admit, I love thinking about Lent—considering what to fast from, imagining the new ways I might engage with Jesus. But when the real work begins, when the hunger pangs hit or the usual distractions are stripped away, I come face to face with something far less inspiring: my own weakness, my lack of self-discipline, my deep-seated dependencies. Fasting has a way of exposing what truly holds sway over us. It reveals just how often we tell ourselves, *I need this or that to be okay*. And in that moment of exposure, we are offered not condemnation, but an invitation.

So far, this devotional has asked us to reflect on our patterns of avoidance, the way our surroundings shape our relationship with God, and how we understand our bodies in light of the resurrection. These are not easy things to sit with. But don't be discouraged by the depth of self-

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examination. Grace is at the heart of it all. The goal is not to wallow in guilt but to recognize the astonishing truth: Christ saw all of this—every fear, every frailty, every misplaced longing—and still went to the cross for us.

Paul reminds us, *“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”* (2 Corinthians 12:9) - Pastor Eric

Chapter 2

Community

Day 6: The Power of Self-Perception

The way we see ourselves shapes the course of our lives—our confidence, our relationships, our ability to receive and extend love. A distorted self-image can trap us in a cycle of shame, fear, or relentless striving, as if our worth depends on our own achievements or failures. We oscillate between feeling either too much or never enough. Yet the biblical story tells a deeper truth: we are fearfully and wonderfully made, known intimately, and loved beyond measure by the One who formed us.

True self-perception is not self-indulgence, nor is it self-neglect. It is learning to see ourselves as God sees us—precious, broken yet redeemed, called into His great purposes. When we fail to grasp this, we either diminish ourselves or exalt ourselves in unhealthy ways. Both lead us away from the freedom Christ offers.

What if this Lenten season was an opportunity to allow God to recalibrate our vision? What if, instead of being shaped by the world's fickle standards, we let His truth define us?

Reflective Questions:

1. What subtle or deep-seated falsehoods about yourself have you unconsciously carried? How might God be inviting you to exchange these for His truth?
2. In what ways does your perception of yourself influence your ability to love and serve others? Does it draw you toward them in humility and grace, or does it create distance?

Deeper Reflection:

- If you were to truly rest in the reality of God's unwavering love—that He delights in you as you are, not as you think you ought to be—how might that transform the way you live, the risks you take, and the burdens you release?

Day 7: Be Still and Know

Psalm 46:10 summons us: *“Be still and know that I am God.”* But stillness is not simply the absence of noise or activity—it is the reordering of our hearts toward the One who holds all things together. In a world brimming with hurry and distraction, true stillness requires an intentional laying down of our illusions of control, a surrender to the deeper reality of God's sovereign presence.

Yet we struggle. Even as we pray, we wonder if anyone is listening. Even as we read Scripture, the words can seem distant, disconnected from our immediate concerns. And so, we must ask:

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What is truly shaping our inner world? What forces—seen and unseen—compete for our trust, our love, our attention? Lent is not simply a time of self-denial, but of reorientation: an invitation to step into the reality of God’s kingdom, to set down lesser loves, and to rediscover the presence of Christ in the stillness.

Reflective Questions:

1. In what areas of your life are you resisting stillness, and what might that resistance reveal about your view of God?
2. How are your habits and rhythms forming your heart—are they training you in trust, or reinforcing self-reliance?

Deeper Reflection:

- What is the true object of your deepest longing right now, and if you follow that longing to its end, will it lead you into the presence of Christ—or away from Him?
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Day 8: The Shape of Our Relationships

Our relationships do far more than occupy space in our lives; they shape us, molding our loves, fears, and hopes in ways we often fail to notice. Even when time or distance separates us, the imprint of family, friends, and community remains, forming the way we see the world—and ourselves. Lent is a season of honest reckoning, a time to ask: How have these relationships drawn us toward Christ, and where have they distorted the love we were made for?

It is an unsettling truth that our past, with all its joys and sorrows, often whispers into our present. Old wounds can resurface in new encounters; the echoes of past disappointments may color our expectations of those around us. But the gospel does not leave us trapped in these patterns. The call of Christ is always a call to renewal—to name what has been broken, to step into the light of grace, and to be formed into people who bear His love rightly.

Reflective Questions:

1. In what ways has your history—both the love you’ve received and the wounds you’ve borne—shaped the way you give and receive love today?
2. Where might Christ be inviting you to surrender the narratives of hurt that still define your relationships, so that His healing might reshape them?

A Deeper Reflection:

- In what ways do your unspoken fears and longings shape your expectations of others? How might the love of Christ invite you to see both yourself and them differently?

Day 9: Naming Our Emotions

Our emotions are not incidental to our faith; they are woven into the very fabric of who we are as image-bearers of God. They reveal the hidden allegiances of our hearts, the things we cherish, the fears we cannot name, and the struggles we would rather avoid. And yet, rather than bringing them into the light of God's presence, we often suppress them, managing them as though they were distractions rather than signposts.

But consider Jesus. He did not merely tolerate emotions—He lived them fully. He wept at the tomb of a friend, not because He lacked faith, but because He loved deeply. He overturned tables, not out of reckless rage, but because His zeal for His Father's house consumed Him. He rejoiced, not simply in circumstances, but in the faith He saw awakening in unexpected places. What if our emotions, rather than being problems to solve, are invitations into deeper communion with God?

Reflective Questions:

1. What emotions have been stirring within you—perhaps quietly, perhaps insistently—that you have been reluctant to acknowledge before God?
2. If your emotions are not random but rather signals of something deeper, what might they be revealing about your desires, your fears, or your understanding of God's presence?

Deeper Reflection:

- If you were to stop managing your emotions as obstacles to be controlled and instead opened them to God as a space where He longs to meet you, what might shift in your relationship with Him—and in your understanding of yourself?

Day 10: The Gift of Community

We often imagine our spiritual journey as a solitary endeavor—our faith, our prayers, our relationship with God. But the scripture tells a far richer and more complex story. From the very beginning, God's design for humanity was not isolation but relationship, not independence but interdependence. Paul, in Romans 12:15, paints a picture of a community so deeply connected that the joys of one become the joys of all, the sorrows of one are carried by the many: "*Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.*"

Yet, if we are honest, this kind of deep, vulnerable community does not come naturally. We hesitate. We fear misunderstanding, judgment, or the painful risk of rejection. It seems safer to keep our struggles locked away, to present only the version of ourselves that we think is acceptable. But here is the paradox: the very thing we fear—being truly seen—is also the place where healing begins. The gospel calls us out of hiding and into the light, where grace is not merely an abstract concept but something we experience through the and presence of others.

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When we step into an authentic community, we learn that we are not alone in our struggles. More than that, we discover that our wounds, our failures, and even our fears can become places where God's grace is most powerfully at work. To embrace community, then, is not simply to seek comfort or companionship but to participate in the very life of God—a life shaped by love, by self-giving, and by the deep mystery of shared joy and shared sorrow.

Reflective Questions:

1. Where in your life have you embraced the illusion of self-sufficiency rather than the call to community?
2. What might it look like to risk being truly known, not just in your strengths but also in your struggles?

Deeper Reflection:

- If you are afraid to let others see your weaknesses, what does that reveal about your understanding of grace?

Day 11: The Challenge of Honesty

Lent is about transformation, and transformation always comes with a cost. To be shaped into the image of Christ is not merely to adjust a few habits or adopt better moral behavior—it is to be utterly renewed, remade, reshaped by the Spirit of God. And renewal begins with truth.

One of the great challenges of the Christian life is our resistance to seeing ourselves as we truly are. We are masters of self-deception, subtly curating our own narratives, ensuring that we never have to look too closely at the places where sin still holds sway. But the invitation of Lent—and indeed, of the gospel itself—is to step into the light. The "Hot Seat" is one way to do this: a moment of radical honesty, where we allow others to hold up a mirror, where we relinquish control over our own image and embrace the uncomfortable reality of truth.

Paul's words in **Romans 12:2** confront us here: *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* This is no superficial call to self-improvement but a summons to allow God's wisdom to reshape our thinking, our desires, our very identity. And yet, transformation is costly. It requires surrender—the willingness to be seen, questioned, even challenged.

So, we must wonder: Do we truly desire to grow, or are we more interested in maintaining the illusion of control? Do we long for holiness, or are we more comfortable with a carefully managed version of ourselves? The way of Christ is always the way of the cross—the pathway of humility, of dying to self, of trusting that God's refining fire, though painful, leads to resurrection life.

Reflective Questions:

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1. Where in your life do you sense resistance to deep transformation? What are you afraid you might lose?
2. How has your need for control shaped the way you present yourself to others—and to God?

Deeper Reflection:

- If Jesus were to sit with you today and ask a single, piercing question about your heart, what might it be? How would you answer?

Day 12: Second Sunday of Lent: Basketball

Many years ago, I played high school basketball. My freshman-year team was the best I'd ever been part of. We dominated our competition—not just with talent, but with preparation. We knew the game better, we trained harder, and when we stepped onto the court, we were always ready. But what I remember most aren't the victories. I remember the practices.

They were brutal. Hour after hour, drill after drill, and always, the running. So much running. There were moments when I wondered if I'd lost my mind. From the outside, it would have been easy to question why I kept showing up, three hours a day, when I rarely got to play in the actual games. And in the end, I decided I wasn't cut out for it. I never played organized basketball again.

That was that—at least, I thought so.

A year later, I was in a pickup game at school, playing against one of the varsity point guards. He had never been particularly kind to me when I was on the team, so I was surprised when, in the middle of the game, he looked over and said, "You should try out for the team."

I laughed. "I already played," I told him. "Freshman year. Thirteenth man on a thirteen-man squad."

He shrugged. "That means you were the thirteenth best player out of all the freshmen in the school. That's pretty good."

I had never thought of it that way.

We are often our own harshest critics. We see our shortcomings, our failures, our inadequacies. But God sees differently. Think of Gideon, hiding in fear, only to be called a "mighty warrior" (Judges 6:12). Or Peter, faltering time and time again, yet chosen to be the rock on which Christ would build his church (Matthew 16:18). We might write ourselves off, but God does not.

So, take courage! Your story is not finished, and your worth is not determined by your own limited perspective. Where you see weakness, God sees strength. Where you see failure, God sees formation. What you thought was the end may, in fact, be the very thing preparing you for what's next. – Pastor Eric

Chapter 3

The Voices

Day 13: The Weight We Carry

Burdens come in many forms. Some are obvious—grief, conflict, and exhaustion. Others press upon us in quieter ways—unspoken fears, the relentless need to prove ourselves, the weight of expectations we never asked to bear. And yet, Lent is not merely a season of acknowledging burdens; it is an invitation to reimagine the way we carry them.

Jesus, in Matthew 11:28-30, speaks to the weary and heavy-laden, offering rest not as mere relief, but as a radical reordering of life: *“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”* This is not an invitation to momentary respite but to an entirely new way of being—one where His yoke, His way, becomes our own.

But how do we recognize the burdens we grip so tightly? One way is through The Wheel exercise. Draw six spokes from a central point, each representing a key area of life, work, relationships, faith, health, and so on. Mark each line according to where you feel strong or struggling, then connect the dots. Does the shape of your life reflect balance and trust, or strain and fragmentation? In doing this, we do not merely diagnose our struggles; we allow God to show us what it means to surrender and receive His rest.

Reflective Questions:

1. What unspoken burdens have subtly shaped your daily existence, and how might Jesus be calling you to release them?
2. If Christ’s yoke is truly easy and His burden light, what assumptions about strength and self-sufficiency must be reexamined in your own life?

A Deeper Reflection:

- In what ways have your burdens become entangled with your sense of identity? If you were to lay them down, who would you be in Christ?
-

Day 14: The Unseen Dialogue

“Wisdom has built her house; she has set up its seven pillars... and she calls from the highest point of the city, ‘Let all who are simple come to my house!’” (Proverbs 9:1)

At every moment, whether we acknowledge it or not, a conversation is unfolding within us. It is not merely the sum of our passing thoughts or fleeting emotions—it is the shaping of our very being. Some voices speak truth, urging us toward life, wholeness, and the purposes of God.

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Others whisper illusions, enticing us with comfort, distraction, or self-deception. The tragedy is that we rarely stop to ask which voice we are following.

The wisdom of Proverbs reminds us that this dialogue is not neutral. It is formative. It is the difference between stepping into the fullness of God's kingdom or remaining trapped in the restless striving of a fractured world. Lent offers us a holy invitation—not just to pause but to listen. To let silence expose the competing voices. To discern where true wisdom is calling and where folly is masquerading as freedom.

Jesus himself often withdrew to quiet places to pray—not because he needed distance from the world, but because he knew that attentiveness to the Father's voice was the foundation of all true life. What if we, too, cultivated such listening? What if we dared to hear what is truly shaping us?

Reflective Questions:

1. Can you recall a time when a hurried or reactive decision led you down an unexpected path? What unseen voices may have shaped that choice?
2. How does the noise of your daily life obscure the voice of wisdom? What might it take to make space for true listening?
3. If Jesus' life was marked by attentiveness to the Father, what does that say about the kind of wisdom we need to seek?

Deeper Reflection:

- If you were to truly listen to your inner dialogue, what might you discover about your deepest desires, fears, or assumptions about God? Are you prepared for what you might hear?
-

Day 15: The Yoke of Christ

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me..." (Matthew 11:28-29)

When Jesus speaks of His yoke, He is not offering us an escape from responsibility but a reorientation of our very lives. A rabbi's yoke was his way of interpreting the Torah, a way of walking in step with God's design. To take up Jesus' yoke is to learn from Him, to enter into His rhythm of life, where rest is not the absence of struggle but the presence of trust.

We all walk beneath some yoke or another—the relentless demand to prove ourselves, the crushing weight of expectations, or the self-imposed burden of control. Some of us stagger under the illusion of independence, as if we alone must hold the world together. But Jesus calls us to something different. His yoke is not free from effort, but it is free from the burden of self-

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justification. It is a way of life in which our striving is reshaped by grace, our toil redefined by love, and our burdens lifted by the One who walks alongside us.

Reflective Questions:

1. What are the unspoken or unseen yokes you have placed upon yourself? Are they shaping you into the person you were made to be, or pulling you away from it?
2. In what ways does Jesus' invitation challenge your understanding of strength and rest?

Deeper Reflection:

- Jesus offers a way of life that is both demanding and liberating. Where do you find yourself resisting His way, preferring the weight of your own yoke to the lightness of His? What does that reveal about what you trust most?
-

Day 16: The Two Voices

"Folly is an unruly woman... she calls out to those who pass by, 'Stolen water is sweet, food eaten in secret is delicious!'" (Proverbs 9:13-17)

At every turn, two voices summon us. One, the voice of Wisdom, speaks of life—the life that comes through discipline, humility, and a slow, steady shaping of our hearts in the way of Christ. The other, the voice of Folly, offers something that seems easier, more immediate, more gratifying. She whispers that there is no need for patience, that hidden indulgence is better than open truth, that the shortcut will do just as well as the long obedience.

But Scripture is clear: these voices do not merely represent different choices; they reveal different allegiances. They are not just two options on a spectrum of human experience, but two fundamentally opposed paths—one that leads toward the renewal of our humanity in Christ, the other toward its unraveling.

Lent is a season of focused listening, of silencing the noise long enough to discern which voice we have been following. Have we allowed Folly to disguise herself as reason, as self-preservation, as personal freedom? Or have we submitted ourselves to the difficult but ultimately beautiful voice of Wisdom, the voice that leads to true life?

Reflective Questions:

1. Where in your life has the promise of ease, secrecy, or self-indulgence led you away from the wholeness God intends?
2. How can you become more attuned to the voice of Wisdom—what habits, disciplines, or relationships help you recognize it?

Deeper Question:

- What do you suspect you might lose if you turn away from the voice of Folly—and what does that reveal about what you truly trust?

Day 17: The Table of Decision

"But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead." (Proverbs 9:18)

Each day, we are confronted with choices—not just the obvious ones, but the ones that subtly shape the contours of our hearts and minds. We like to think that once we have committed to following Jesus, the rest follows naturally, that discipleship is simply a matter of course. But the wisdom of Scripture tells us otherwise. Transformation is not something that happens to us while we stand idly by; it is something in which we are called to participate.

Jesus did not simply offer an invitation; he issued a summons. His call demands that we actively turn away from the burdens and false narratives imposed by the world—distorted visions of success, security, and identity that, left unchecked, lead not to life but to ruin. The challenge is not merely about avoiding what is obviously destructive but about discerning the quiet, hidden influences that shape us without our consent.

The question is not whether we are sitting at the table of decision. We are. The real question is whether we recognize the stakes. To follow Jesus is to wake up to the reality that every choice—however small—participates in either the kingdom of life or the kingdom of death.

Reflective Questions:

1. What are the unnoticed patterns of thinking and acting that have more influence over your life than you realize?
2. If every decision is an act of spiritual formation, how might that change the way you approach the seemingly small choices of your day?

Deeper Question:

- In what ways do you resist acknowledging the weight of your choices, and what does that reveal about your understanding of grace and responsibility?
-

Day 18: Rescued From Darkness

"He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves." (Colossians 1:13)

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Christian faith is not simply about embracing a new perspective; it is about being transferred—wholly and decisively—from one realm to another. Paul does not say that we are in the process of escaping the dominion of darkness. He says that we have been rescued. The Exodus has already happened. And yet, how often do we live as though we are still slaves in Egypt, as though Pharaoh still has a claim on us?

The Lenten journey is not about securing our rescue—it is about learning to live as those who have already been set free. The habits of the old kingdom die hard. We still carry the burdens that no longer belong to us, still heed the voices that no longer have authority, still stumble in shadows even as the light of Christ has dawned. The challenge before us is not to achieve our liberation but to inhabit it—to walk in the light, to learn the language of the new kingdom, to trust that the rescue is real.

Reflective Questions:

1. Where do you find yourself still acting as though you belong to the old dominion? What habits, fears, or patterns persist as though Christ had not already set you free?
2. If you truly believed—not just in theory, but in the deepest core of your being—that you are now part of Christ’s kingdom, how would that transform your daily life?

Deeper Reflection:

- What stories—about yourself, about God, about the world—are keeping you tethered to the old dominion? What would it look like to let Christ rewrite them?

Day 19 The Third Sunday of Lent: Memorial Service

At my mother’s memorial service, after the service had ended, a man and his wife approached me. They wanted to tell me how beautiful the service had been—but that wasn’t really what they had come to say. What they truly wanted me to hear was how much they had enjoyed my words, how they had seen something in me they hadn’t expected: confidence, humor, even a sense of ease in front of so many people.

Now, for a little context. The man’s name is Tom. He is my father’s peer, a family friend I have known for as long as I can remember. And, as it turns out, he had more to say than just words of encouragement.

When I was sixteen, my father had confided in Tom, sharing his quiet concern. I was shy, hesitant. My circle of friends was small, and I hadn’t yet bothered to get my driver’s license. To my dad, it seemed as though I wasn’t interested in the wider world, as though I might never step into it with any real confidence.

Lent: An Inward Look

Tom, as he reminded me that day, had once taken me out for dinner. He had tried to encourage me, to speak words of life into a timid teenager. I don't remember that conversation—but he does. And standing there in the wake of my mother's memorial, he pointed out what my father had once struggled to see: that God had taken that hesitant, unsure young man and shaped him into someone willing to stand before 350 people and speak with boldness.

It brings to mind the words of Paul:

"Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong." (1 Corinthians 1:26-27)

God is in the business of transformation. He takes what seems small and uncertain and breathes life into it. He calls the reluctant and makes them bold. He lifts up those who feel unseen and places them in the middle of his great story. It is never about our own strength, our own ability, or even our own memory of how we got here. It is about his quiet, persistent work—his hand shaping us over the years, often in ways we can only recognize in hindsight.

And perhaps that is the real encouragement: that long before we see the work God is doing, he is already at work. – Pastor Eric

Chapter 4

The Enemy

Day 20: The Obstacles to Growth

"If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Paul's declaration is breathtaking: in Christ, the world is being remade, and so are we. But this isn't merely a comforting thought or a distant hope—it's a present reality breaking in now. And yet, if we are honest, we often struggle to live as though it were true.

Why? Because growth in Christ is not automatic. It requires learning to inhabit the new world while still feeling the pull of the old. We face four primary obstacles: our unfamiliarity with the way of Jesus, the subtle and relentless attacks of the enemy, our misguided expectations about what transformation should feel like, and our misunderstandings of how true change actually happens.

Each of these obstacles keeps us from stepping into the fullness of who we are in Christ. They whisper that growth is out of reach, that we are destined to remain stuck, that real transformation is for someone else. But Lent is a season of truth-telling. It invites us to name these barriers—not as immovable walls, but as challenges to be met with courage and faith. The call to be a new creation is not just a theological concept; it is the invitation to live in God's future now.

The question is not whether God is at work in us, but whether we will trust His work enough to take the next step forward.

Reflection

1. As you consider these four obstacles, where do you sense resistance in your own life?
2. How might your expectations about growth be shaped more by culture or personal experience than by the way of Jesus?

Deeper Reflection:

- What unspoken assumptions do you hold about yourself that make growth seem impossible? And how do those assumptions compare with what God has said about you?

Day 21: The Reality of Our Darkness

13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1:13-14)

Lent: An Inward Look

As we immerse ourselves in Scripture, we are confronted with a stark and sobering reality—humanity, left to itself, is exiled from God’s presence, captive to a world that operates in rebellion against its Creator. Paul, in Colossians 1:13, describes this state as living under the dominion of darkness. This is not mere poetic language; it is the deep and tragic truth of a world that has lost its way. Before we even knew to call out for rescue, we were already shaped by its shadows, conforming to a pattern of life that runs contrary to the very order and goodness of God’s kingdom.

Yet the gospel declares that we have been delivered—transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son. But this rescue is not merely a past event; it is a present and ongoing reality. The habits, assumptions, and desires formed in the old kingdom do not simply vanish at the moment of faith. We carry them with us, like exiles still speaking the language of a land they have left. Transformation, then, is not about adding a new layer of Christian behavior onto an old foundation; it is about a fundamental reorientation—learning to breathe the air of the new creation while unlearning the ways of a world still in rebellion.

Paul’s call in Colossians is urgent: You must actively participate in this renewal. The gospel does not invite us to a passive, private spirituality but to a robust and total reconstruction of our lives. We are to reject the false narratives of the world, to silence the deceptive voices that still echo in our hearts, and to allow Christ to reshape every facet of our being. This is not easy. But it is the only path to true freedom.

Reflective Questions:

1. Where do you see remnants of the old kingdom still shaping your desires, fears, or assumptions about yourself and the world?
2. What are the subtle ways you justify patterns of thought or behavior that Christ has called you to leave behind?
3. How does the reality of your rescue change the way you engage with the world around you?

Deeper Reflection:

- Do you truly believe that stepping into the light of Christ’s kingdom will be better than the familiar comforts of the darkness you’ve known? How does your life’s direction reflect that belief?

Day 22: Taking Up Christ’s Yoke

Jesus does not merely offer us relief from exhaustion; He offers us a whole new way of being. When He calls the weary and burdened to come to Him (Matthew 11:28-30), He is not simply inviting us to set down our loads and rest. He is offering an exchange—our heavy burdens for His yoke, our striving for His guidance, our restless toil for a peace that is rooted in trust. But notice what He does not say: He does not say, “Come to me, and I will take away all labor.”

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Instead, He says, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.” Rest, in Jesus’ vision, is not idleness but a new rhythm of life—one that is shaped by His humility, His gentleness, and His unwavering trust in the Father.

To take up Christ’s yoke is to be bound to Him, to learn His way of carrying the world’s weight, to discover that His burden is, paradoxically, light. This is not because discipleship is easy, but because it is the only way to be truly human, truly alive. When we insist on bearing our own burdens, forging our own path, we find ourselves crushed by expectations, anxieties, and the relentless demands of our own ambitions. Jesus, by contrast, offers us a yoke that fits—a way of life in which our souls can finally breathe.

But here is the question we must face: Do we believe Him? Do we trust that His yoke is better than the one we have been carrying? Or do we, deep down, suspect that to surrender to His way would be to lose something essential?

Reflection Questions

1. What burdens do you continue to carry, even though Jesus has invited you to release them? Why do you cling to them?
2. In what ways have you misunderstood Jesus’ yoke? Have you seen it as an added burden rather than a new way of freedom?
3. What would it look like to trust that Jesus’ way—His humility, His gentleness, His rest—is actually the most life-giving path forward?
4. How does Jesus’ definition of rest challenge your own understanding of what it means to find peace?

Deeper Reflection

- What would it take for you to trust that Jesus’ yoke is lighter, not heavier, than the one you have chosen for yourself? And if you fear His yoke, what does that reveal about what you truly believe about His character?

Day 23: A New Culture, A New Life

Many have treated the Gospel as a message about individual salvation, a kind of personal escape plan—a ticket to heaven, stamped and ready. But the New Testament presents something far grander: the Gospel is the inbreaking of God’s kingdom, a whole new reality that reshapes every aspect of life. It is not merely a set of truths to affirm but a new citizenship, a radical reorientation of the heart, mind, and body.

Paul speaks of this transformation in terms of moving from one realm to another: from darkness to light, from the old humanity to the new, from slavery to sin to the freedom of God’s children. This is not an adjustment to our current way of life; it is an entirely different existence. Learning to inhabit this new world takes time. Our instincts, our desires, even our reflexive ways of

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thinking have been shaped by the old order. The habits of selfishness, power, and self-preservation—so deeply ingrained in the fallen world—do not simply evaporate overnight.

This is why Paul speaks so often of putting on Christ, of being renewed in mind and spirit, of learning the rhythms and practices of the kingdom. We are, in a sense, immigrants to a new land, adjusting to customs that feel foreign at first but which, over time, become our true home. The challenge, of course, is that we do not make this transition in isolation. The world around us still speaks with the old accent, still urges us to live as we once did. The battle is not merely external but internal: where do our deepest loyalties lie?

Reflective Questions:

1. Where do you sense the greatest friction between the culture of the kingdom and the patterns of the world? In what ways do those tensions play out in your daily life?
2. What old habits, assumptions, or desires continue to pull you back toward the ways of your former life? How do you see God patiently reshaping them?

Deeper Reflection:

- When you think about the Gospel, do you primarily see it as an invitation into a new way of being human? Or do you find yourself reducing it to a set of doctrines to believe? How might this shift in perspective change the way you live?
-

Day 24: The Voice of Our Old Master

The enemy of our souls does not surrender ground easily. He is well-acquainted with our weaknesses, adept at exploiting our fears, and skilled in twisting the truth just enough to make deception feel like wisdom. His voice is not an unfamiliar one—it is the voice of our old master, the voice we once obeyed without question. It speaks in half-truths, in subtle distortions of reality, in urgings that seem reasonable but ultimately lead us away from trust in the living God.

This is why we must become deeply familiar with the voice of our new Master. It is not enough to reject falsehood—we must be so immersed in the truth that deception is instantly recognizable. The way of Christ does not come naturally to us. We have spent too many years learning the language of self-preservation, control, and fear. The habits of darkness cling to us, even as we step into the light. But as we attune ourselves to the voice of the Shepherd—through Scripture, prayer, worship, and the shared life of the Church—we begin to recognize the tone, the cadence, the authority of the One who calls us His own.

To follow Jesus is not simply to resist the enemy but to be drawn ever more deeply into the life of God. And as we do, the voice that once seemed so familiar begins to sound foreign, hollow, unconvincing. The old master still calls, but we no longer listen as we once did.

Reflective Questions:

1. How do you recognize the difference between the voice of Christ and the voice of the enemy in your daily life?
2. What practices shape your ability to discern truth from distortion?

Deeper Reflection:

- Are there ways in which the voice of your old master still feels more familiar, perhaps even more compelling, than the voice of Christ? What does that reveal about where your trust is truly placed?
-

Day 25: The Roaring Lion and the Battle Unseen

8 Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

1 Peter 5:8 reminds us that we are not merely navigating the ups and downs of life—we are caught in the midst of a deeper, more profound struggle. The enemy prowls like a lion, not in the sense of an obvious, grotesque villain lurking in the shadows, but as a master strategist, whispering half-truths, sowing doubt, and subtly bending our desires away from the love of Christ.

The true danger of the enemy’s work is not in the outright assaults we can easily name but in the quiet erosion of our trust in God’s goodness. He plays upon our anxieties, twists our wounds into reasons for self-protection, and nudges us toward self-reliance rather than surrender. If we are inattentive, we will not recognize his voice for what it is. His tactics are rarely a direct assault; they are distractions masquerading as responsibilities, fears disguised as wisdom, self-preservation clothed in common sense.

Peter’s exhortation is not to cower in fear but to stand firm in the reality of Christ’s victory. To be “alert and of sober mind” is not merely to be watchful for attacks, but to be deeply attuned to the story we are living in—the story in which Jesus has already triumphed. The battle is not won by our strength but by our unwavering trust in the One who has already crushed the serpent’s head.

Reflective Questions

1. What subtle distortions of truth have shaped your thoughts and desires without you realizing it?
2. How might the enemy be using your own strengths—your gifts, your responsibilities, even your good intentions—to quietly pull you away from dependence on Christ?

Deeper Question

- Do you live as if the greatest threats to your well-being are external circumstances, or do you recognize the deeper battle for your heart's allegiance?
-

Day 26: The Fourth Sunday of Lent: My Mother

There I stood in the hallway, my mother sixteen feet away, her eyes fixed on me with a look that left no room for negotiation. I can't recall the details of our argument—whatever petty grievances or teenage frustrations had brought us here—but I remember *this* moment with absolute clarity. She was finished. Finished with my excuses, finished with my isolation, finished with watching me waste the summer in a fog of indifference.

Then she spoke. *"Next week, when you go to school, you need to have joined two clubs and made two friends. If you don't, you can't live here anymore. I'll pack your bags, and you can go live with another family."*

An ultimatum. A line drawn in the sand. And yet, looking back, it was nothing less than grace.

I didn't recognize it at the time, but something shifted in me at that moment. It was as if the Holy Spirit had launched out of my mother's mouth and struck me in the chest. My fear, for the most part, vanished. I didn't just comply; I submitted. Not to my mother alone, but to the movement of Jesus through her.

And so, I did what she asked. By the end of that first week, I had joined two clubs and—by God's providence—befriended two of the smartest students in the school. That single decision reshaped everything. My grades soared. My confidence grew. But more than that, something deeper was happening. What began as an act of reluctant obedience quickly became a transformation of heart.

That transformation didn't stop with academics or friendships—it stirred something in my soul. I started a prayer group in the library before school. I became a leader in my church's youth ministry. To my own astonishment, I found myself counted among the more popular students—not because I sought it, but because something had been set in motion. I began sharing my faith. I began living with purpose.

Looking back, it seems almost absurd—this sudden, seismic change, all triggered by a hallway conversation. And yet, isn't that how God so often works? A command given. A challenge laid before us. A moment in which we must either step forward in faith or shrink back in fear. When Jesus called Peter from his fishing boat, it wasn't a polite suggestion. It was a summons to a new life. *"Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men"* (Matthew 4:19). The call of God is rarely gentle, rarely comfortable, but it is always transformative.

Lent: An Inward Look

That hallway moment—my own personal *come to Jesus* moment—wasn't just about clubs or friendships. It was about obedience, about surrender, about stepping into the unknown and discovering that, all along, God had been leading me there. – Pastor Eric

Chapter 5

Discipleship

Day 27: The Call to Stand Firm

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. 13 Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. 14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. (Eph 6:10-18)

Too often, we imagine spiritual warfare as either a dramatic cosmic struggle beyond our reach or a vague metaphor for moral effort. But Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 6:10-18 offers a different vision: a call to stand firm, not in fear, not in our own strength, but in the power of the crucified and risen Christ.

The armor of God is not a collection of virtues we strive to attain, nor a checklist for spiritual success. It is the very means by which we participate in the victory Christ has already won. Truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, and the Word of God are not abstract ideals but the weapons forged in the reality of the cross and resurrection. Without them, we are exposed to the enemy's deception. With them, we stand not as frightened soldiers awaiting defeat, but as those who belong to the King who has already triumphed.

The real question is not whether the battle is raging—Scripture assures us it is—but whether we are standing in the reality of what Christ has accomplished. If we do not daily immerse ourselves in the truth of the Gospel, if we do not cultivate a life steeped in prayer and communion with God, we will find ourselves not merely struggling, but disoriented, fighting battles on the wrong fronts.

The call is not to summon up our own strength but to stand in His. To be clothed in Christ is to take hold of what is already ours in Him. This is not passive resignation, but an active, unwavering stance in the face of opposition. The victory is assured, but the question remains: **Will we live as if it is?**

Reflective Questions:

1. In what ways are you tempted to rely on your own strength rather than standing in Christ's victory?

2. How does the truth of the Gospel shape your understanding of spiritual resistance?

Deeper Reflection:

- Do you approach life as if Christ’s victory is theoretical or as if it is the defining reality of your existence? What difference would it make if you truly believed the battle has already been won?
-

Day 28: The Gospel Before the Cross

“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”— Mark 1:15

Long before the cross and resurrection, Jesus announced that the gospel—the good news—was already at hand. But what, precisely, did He mean? When we speak of “the gospel,” we often focus on Jesus’s death and resurrection, and rightly so. Yet here, at the very outset of His public ministry, before a single parable had been told or a single disciple had grasped the full weight of His mission, Jesus was already proclaiming the arrival of God’s kingdom.

Jesus Himself is the good news, not simply in what He would later accomplish, but in His very presence. His coming—God stepping into history as Israel’s long-awaited Messiah—was the fulfillment of promises spoken through the prophets. His healings, His forgiveness of sins, His meals with sinners, His authority over the storm, all of it declared that God’s rule was breaking in. The great restoration had begun, though not in the way anyone expected.

Lent is not merely a season of preparing for the cross; it is a season of waking up to the reality that God’s kingdom is already among us. To follow Jesus is not simply to affirm a doctrinal system but to live as though God’s reign is truly at hand, reshaping our lives in light of His presence. This is not about waiting passively for salvation to come someday; it is about stepping into the life of the kingdom here and now.

Reflective Questions:

- If we understand the gospel not just as a message about Jesus, but as Jesus Himself, how does that transform our grasp of what it means to believe?
- What signs of God’s kingdom do you see breaking into your life and the world around you? How are you being invited to participate?

Deeper Reflection:

- Imagine hearing these words from Jesus in real time, before the crucifixion. What assumptions or expectations about the kingdom would you have brought with you? How might Jesus’s words have challenged or even unsettled you?

Day 29: Jesus is Lord

"If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." – Romans 10:9

To say "Jesus is Lord" is not a private religious sentiment, nor is it a mantra to be repeated mindlessly. It is a declaration of allegiance, a reordering of everything we are. For the early Christians, this claim was subversive—Caesar claimed absolute authority, demanding loyalty, tribute, and worship. Yet Paul and the first believers dared to proclaim that true power and true rule belonged not to Rome, but to the crucified and risen Messiah.

And so, Lent asks us a searching question: Do we say "Jesus is Lord" in a way that truly shapes our lives, or is it a phrase we merely affirm while living as though other forces—fear, ambition, wealth, social approval—are the real powers at work? The gospel is not about fitting Jesus into an existing framework; it is about allowing his kingship to redefine everything—our priorities, our relationships, our hopes.

The kingdom Jesus inaugurates is not one of domination but of self-giving love. It is not built on coercion but on the slow, patient work of healing, justice, and grace. To proclaim Jesus as Lord means to embody this kingdom in our own lives, bearing witness to a different kind of rule—the rule of love that remakes the world.

Reflective Questions:

1. When you say "Jesus is Lord," what are the competing lords that push against this claim in your life? Are they external pressures, or do they emerge from within?
2. If Jesus is truly Lord, what does that mean for the way you respond to power—whether your own, others', or the world's?
3. How does the resurrection, as the great vindication of Jesus's kingship, challenge your deepest assumptions about what is possible?

Deeper Reflection:

- In practical terms, what does it look like to live today as if Jesus, not fear, wealth, or status, has the final word over your decisions, your interactions, and your hopes?
- How might the way you live bear witness to the world that a different kind of kingdom is breaking in?

Day 30: The Gospel as Story

3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom

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are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

The gospel is not merely a set of abstract truths to be believed; it is the grand, sweeping narrative of God's faithfulness—his covenant love moving through history, from creation to new creation. At the heart of this story stands Jesus, Israel's Messiah and the world's true Lord, bringing all things to their intended fulfillment.

Yet, the world tells competing stories, ones that shape our imaginations and desires more than we realize. There is the story of self-fulfillment, where personal happiness and success are paramount. There is the story of power, where influence and control define our worth. And there is the story of security, where comfort and predictability become our highest aims. But these are shallow, fragile narratives—distorted echoes of something greater.

Lent is a time to ask: **Which story is truly shaping me?** Have I merely grafted Christian belief onto a different foundational story, one that still centers on my own ambitions, fears, or cultural assumptions? Or have I truly entered into the gospel's story, where self-giving love, sacrificial faithfulness, and resurrection hope redefine my purpose?

To live fully within the gospel's story is not just to believe in Jesus but to inhabit his way of being in the world—to be shaped by his cross and resurrection, to see all things in light of God's coming kingdom.

Reflective Questions:

1. What are the dominant cultural or personal narratives that shape how you understand yourself and the world? How do they subtly compete with the gospel?
2. In what ways have you reduced the gospel to a set of beliefs rather than a story that demands your full participation?
3. How does Jesus's life, death, and resurrection reframe your ambitions, fears, and longings?

Deeper Reflection:

- If you were to tell the story of your life as part of God's great redemptive work, how would that change the way you see your past, your struggles, and your future?
- What might it mean, in practical terms, to live as if resurrection, not success or comfort, is the defining reality of your existence?

Day 31: The Gospel as Identity

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." – **Galatians 2:20**

We live in an age obsessed with identity. The world tells us that we must construct it for ourselves—through achievement, status, reputation, or self-expression. We are urged to define ourselves by what we accomplish, how we feel, or how others perceive us. But the gospel speaks a startlingly different word: our identity is not self-made; it is received. It is grounded not in shifting human effort, but in the unshakable reality of Christ himself.

To say, as Paul does, that we have been *crucified with Christ* is to recognize that our old ways of defining ourselves—whether by success, failure, moral effort, or social standing—have been put to death. Our life is no longer our own; it is now *hidden with Christ in God* (Colossians 3:3). This is not a mere metaphor or a shift in self-perception; it is a reordering of reality. To be *in Christ* is to be caught up into His life, His death, and His resurrection. Our past no longer defines us, our present is held in His hands, and our future is secure in His kingdom.

Lent calls us to strip away the illusions of self-sufficiency, the false identities we cling to, and the restless striving to prove our worth. In Christ, we are already known, already loved, already secure. And because of this, we are set free—not to build an identity through performance, but to live as those whose very being is rooted in the unchanging love of God.

Reflective Questions

1. Where are you still tempted to define yourself by external measures—success, reputation, approval—rather than by your identity in Christ?
2. If your old self has truly been crucified with Christ, what does that mean for the way you handle fear, shame, or regret?
3. How does the reality of Christ living in you transform the way you approach both suffering and joy?

Deeper Reflection

- If your truest identity is found *in Christ*, how does that reframe your understanding of success and failure? How might it reshape your ambitions, relationships, and even the way you handle criticism?
- If Christ is your life, then what does it mean to surrender your own sense of control over your story and trust Him with it?

Day 32: The Gospel as Kingdom

"But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." – Matthew 6:33

When Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, He wasn't offering a comforting religious idea for private spirituality. He was announcing something revolutionary—the arrival of God's reign, reshaping reality itself. The gospel is not merely about securing a place in heaven; it is the declaration that God's rule has begun on earth as it is in heaven, and we are invited to live under it now.

To seek the kingdom is to allow the priorities of God's reign—justice, mercy, holiness, and love—to reorder everything about our lives. It means confronting the illusions of security offered by wealth and power, resisting the pervasive influence of fear and self-interest, and instead trusting in the generosity of God. It calls us to live as if Jesus is truly Lord, not just in theory, but in how we work, how we relate to others, how we steward resources, and how we engage the world's brokenness.

Lent is a time to realign ourselves with this reality—to step away from the shallow distractions of the present age and learn again what it means to live as citizens of God's kingdom. The question is not whether God's reign is advancing; the question is whether we are willing to recognize it and take part in it.

Reflective Questions

1. Where do you see signs—however small or unexpected—that God's kingdom is at work in the world around you? What do those signs teach you about the nature of God's rule?
2. How might your daily choices—how you spend money, how you speak to others, how you respond to difficulty—reflect or obscure the reality of God's kingdom?
3. In what ways are you tempted to seek security in things that Jesus warns will ultimately fail? What would it look like to entrust those areas fully to God?

Deeper Reflection

- If Jesus were shaping your community, how would its values, priorities, and rhythms change? What structures or habits would be transformed?
- What would it mean for you to live today as if God's kingdom were already fully realized?

Day 33: Fifth Sunday of Lent: Uprooted

I was twelve years old when my world was upended. My parents had uprooted our family from a small mining town in Arizona and planted us in a quiet farming community in Indiana. My father left behind everything—his career, his friends, his church—to pursue seminary and a counseling degree. I knew little of his reasons. What I did know was that he had torn me away from the only life I had ever known.

And that brings us to one of the most formative moments of my childhood.

Dr. Larry Crabb was coming for dinner. My father spoke of him often, with the kind of admiration that made me suspicious. I owned three adventure books that Larry had written, and I wanted him to sign them—but if I'm honest, I was also terrified of him. From everything I had overheard, Dr. Crabb had a way of seeing right through people, as if he could peer into their very souls and uncover what they would rather keep hidden. Why my parents had upended our entire lives because of a man like that, I could not understand. And I resented him for it.

Yet somewhere in the middle of dinner, something in me shifted. Without thinking, I ran to my room, grabbed my books, and brought them to him. He took them, signed them, and then, with those piercing blue eyes that seemed to search out truth itself, he asked a question: *Where do you go to church? Do you like it?*

I panicked. He saw too much. Before I could stop myself, I blurted out, *We don't go to church because we're atheists.*

Fast forward to 2020.

Dr. Crabb was leading a weeklong Soul-Care training in Colorado, and Mark and I, with encouragement from Pastor Rod, decided to go. It felt like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—to sit under the teaching of the man who had shaped my parents so profoundly. But we also knew he wasn't well. If we were ever going to meet him face to face, this was our chance.

I wept through most of that week.

One day, I told Larry the story of our first encounter. He laughed. Later, in one of the meetings, I was given the opportunity to lay hands on him and bless him. The moment was strange, profound, and deeply Jesus-like. For years, he had shaped my life from a distance. And now, at the end of his journey, I found myself standing close, saying goodbye.

It is remarkable how Jesus works. He takes the scattered fragments of our stories and weaves them into something we could never have anticipated. He moves in ways that, at first, feel disruptive—pulling us from comfort, leading us into uncertainty—but always with a greater purpose in mind.

In the end, what seemed like upheaval was really an invitation. What felt like loss was, in truth, the shaping of a deeper, richer story. – Pastor Eric

Chapter 6

Listening

Day 34: The Gospel Embodied

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." – John 1:14

When John speaks of the Word becoming flesh, he is not merely offering a poetic phrase. He is announcing something utterly astonishing: the living God has stepped into the story He Himself is writing. Jesus does not simply proclaim the kingdom; He *is* the kingdom in person. In Him, healing is not an abstract concept—it is hands touching lepers. Reconciliation is not a theological idea—it is the scandalous invitation to tax collectors and sinners. Love is not mere sentiment—it is the self-giving sacrifice of the cross.

And now, through the Spirit, this reality continues. The church, the people of God, is not an audience that passively receives the good news but a people formed to *inhabit* it. We are to be living echoes of Jesus in the world, embodying His love, His justice, His mercy, His truth. The incarnation, in a profound sense, goes on through us.

Lent is not simply a season of reflection; it is a time of realignment. If we take seriously the claim that Christ dwells in us, what does that demand of our lives? How might this astonishing truth reshape our daily choices, our relationships, our priorities?

Reflective Questions

1. If Jesus' life was the embodiment of God's love, what does it mean for you to carry that same presence into your family, workplace, and community?
2. In what areas of your life have you settled for *believing* the gospel rather than *inhabiting* it?

Deeper Reflection

- If someone were to observe your life for a week, what would they learn about the character of the God you serve?
- Where might Jesus be calling you beyond comfort and convention, into a more radical participation in His mission?

Day 35 – The Art of Truly Hearing

"Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance." — Proverbs 1:5

We live in a world saturated with noise—conversations, arguments, competing narratives—all demanding our attention. Yet, how often do we truly listen? Not just hearing words as they pass by, but attending to them with the kind of careful, patient openness that leads to real understanding.

Scripture repeatedly calls us to a kind of listening that goes beyond the surface. It is no accident that in both Hebrew and Greek, the words for *hearing* often imply *obedience*—a readiness not only to absorb words but to be changed by them. Jesus modeled this kind of listening. He did not merely process information; He entered into the longings, fears, and hopes of those He encountered. When Nicodemus came in the secrecy of night, Jesus heard the deep questions behind his cautious words. When Mary and Martha grieved their brother's death, Jesus received not only their sorrow but their unspoken trust. When the woman at the well spoke of thirst, He revealed a deeper kind of water altogether.

Lent is a season of attunement, a time to quiet our reflexive speech and reactive thoughts so that we might hear more truly—not just the voices of others, but the voice of God. To listen well is to love well. It is to reflect the heart of the One who leans in, who hears not just words but the soul beneath them.

Reflective Questions:

1. Consider a moment when you knew—beyond mere words—that you had been truly understood. What did that do to your heart?
2. In what ways does your own tendency to speak, analyze, or defend keep you from listening as Christ does?

Deeper Reflection:

- How might listening be an act of faith—an openness to the work of the Spirit in another person?
- Jesus often listened with the intent to draw people toward truth and transformation. How might your listening, in the Spirit's hands, become a means of grace in the lives of those around you?

Day 36: Drawing Out the Deep Waters

"The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out." — Proverbs 20:5

Beneath the surface of every human life lies a depth we seldom acknowledge—longings that shape our choices, fears that drive our actions, and a search for meaning that we often struggle to name. Scripture tells us that these are "deep waters," not easily accessed, not readily understood. But wisdom, real wisdom, knows how to draw them out.

Jesus, time and again, demonstrated this wisdom. He didn't simply dispense answers; He asked questions that unlocked the very core of a person's soul. "What do you want me to do for you?" He asked the blind man. "Why are you so afraid?" He said to the disciples in the storm. "Do you love me?" He asked Peter after his failure. These were not rhetorical flourishes or surface-level inquiries. They were invitations—calls to self-examination, to transformation, to a new way of seeing.

When we listen well—when we enter into the stories of others with patience and attentiveness—we join in this work. We become, in a small way, what Jesus was: people who help others recognize their own hearts. And as we do so, we may just find that our own depths are drawn out in the process.

Reflective Questions:

1. Think of a moment when a question—or a conversation—revealed something about yourself you hadn't fully seen before. What was it about that moment that opened your eyes?
2. In what ways do your interactions with others invite them into deeper reflection, rather than just passing the time?
3. Jesus' questions were often unsettling yet healing. If He were to ask you something today, what might it be? And how would you answer?

Deeper Reflection:

Spend some time in prayer or journaling, asking: What is it that I truly desire? Where am I resisting transformation? What question might Jesus be pressing upon my heart right now?

Day 37: The Transforming Power of Reframing

"Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." — Romans 12:2

We rarely stop to consider just how much of our thinking is shaped by forces beyond our awareness—our upbringing, cultural narratives, personal wounds, and deep-seated fears. We do not simply "think" our way through life; we absorb patterns of thought, interpret experiences through ingrained assumptions, and form identities based on past experiences rather than on the truth of who God says we are.

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But here, Paul insists: transformation comes through the renewal of the mind. Not by striving harder, not by adjusting external behaviors, but by allowing God to reshape the very way we see the world, ourselves, and others. Jesus Himself was a master of this. Again and again, He encountered people imprisoned by their own narratives—stories of shame, failure, or limitation—and He reframed their reality in the light of God’s kingdom.

To the woman caught in adultery, He did not simply offer mercy; He redefined her future: *“Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”* To Peter, devastated by his denial, Jesus did not dwell on his failure but called him forward into a new vocation: *“Feed my sheep.”* These were not just words of comfort but radical acts of reframing, invitations to step into an identity shaped not by fear, guilt, or regret, but by the love and purposes of God.

If we are to be transformed this Lent, we must ask: where have we accepted a version of reality that is less than the truth of God’s kingdom? What if the very things we assume to be fixed—our limitations, our wounds, our past—are the very places Christ longs to renew?

Reflective Questions:

1. What underlying assumptions shape the way you see yourself, God, or others? Are they aligned with the truth of the gospel?
2. Can you think of a time when someone helped you reframe a situation, seeing it from a new and truer perspective? How did that change you?
3. How might you, like Jesus, help someone else reimagine their story in the light of grace and renewal?

Deeper Reflection:

- Where in your life is Jesus challenging you to let go of an old narrative and step into His kingdom reality?
- How does renewing your mind reshape not only your thoughts but your actions and relationships?

Day 38: The Discipline of Silence

“Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.” — James 1:19

We live in a world that prizes immediacy—instant opinions, rapid responses, quick solutions. To hesitate, to leave a moment of silence, is often seen as weakness. Yet throughout Scripture, silence is not a void to be feared but a space where something deeper takes shape.

Jesus understood this well. When the woman caught in adultery was dragged before Him, He did not meet the Pharisees’ demands with immediate argument or counter-accusation. Instead, He bent down and wrote in the dust, allowing the weight of the moment to settle, giving space for

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conviction to take root. Before Pilate, faced with the machinery of power and injustice, Jesus chose silence—not as resignation, but as a refusal to let the world dictate the terms of truth.

Silence is not passive. It is an act of trust. It is the discipline of recognizing that God's voice is not always found in our quick-witted replies or our well-crafted defenses, but often in the spaces between words. When we learn to listen—truly listen—we open ourselves to the Spirit's voice, shaping us beyond the noise of our own assumptions and anxieties.

Reflective Questions:

1. When have you experienced silence as something unsettling? When has it been a gift?
2. What might change in your relationships if you practiced listening as an act of trust rather than as a strategy for response?
3. In what areas of your life might God be inviting you to resist the impulse to speak and instead cultivate the habit of waiting?

Deeper Reflection:

- How does Jesus' use of silence challenge your assumptions about wisdom and authority?
 - Where in your spiritual life might silence create space for deeper transformation?
-

Day 39: Creating a Space of Grace

"Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep." — Romans 12:15

The way we listen to one another reveals what we truly believe about God's kingdom. To be heard without fear of dismissal or correction is to be offered a foretaste of grace itself. This is the kind of space Jesus created—not merely a neutral zone of non-judgment but an active invitation into dignity, love, and transformation.

Think of the people who came to Jesus—the woman who wept at his feet, the tax collector who climbed a tree just to glimpse him, the blind man who called out despite being shushed by the crowd. Again and again, Jesus created room for them, not merely by hearing their words, but by truly seeing them, naming their longings, and welcoming them into a new way of being.

Lent is a time to ask whether we extend that same kind of grace. Do we make space for others to be fully known, or do we hurry past their stories, distracted by our own need to respond? Have we, like the disciples, ever found ourselves frustrated by those who interrupt our plans—only to realize that Jesus sees these interruptions as sacred encounters?

Reflective Questions:

1. Think of a time when you truly felt heard. What was it about that moment that made it?
 2. In what ways do your habits of listening reflect your vision of God's kingdom?
-

3. Are there people in your life whom you struggle to listen to well? What might it look like to offer them the kind of presence Jesus offered?

Deeper Reflection:

- Jesus' presence was never passive—he didn't simply allow people to speak, but he engaged with them in a way that reshaped their stories. How might you cultivate that kind of presence in your own relationships?
- Consider the way Jesus responded differently to each person who came to him. What does that teach you about the kind of attentiveness required to truly hear another's heart?

Day 40 Sixth Sunday of Lent: Preaching

Sometime last year, as the evening service at the Village Church began, a familiar wave of doubt and hesitation crept in. A tangle of questions flooded my mind—was the sermon strong enough? Did it matter? Was I the right person to deliver it? My thoughts felt hijacked, the still, steady voice of truth drowned out by an unsettling whisper of inadequacy.

I have preached many times before, yet the weight of it can still feel immense. The effort required often looms large, and in those moments, I catch myself wondering whether I have the strength to see it through.

Later that night, as I reflected on the day, a realization emerged: my nerves fray most easily when my preparation is thin. Sunday mornings are sacred—I set them apart for prayer, for stillness, for an unhurried meeting with Jesus before stepping into the gathered worship of the church. But Sunday evenings? They are far more scattered. A walk, a nap, a game on television, a scroll through videos—all pleasant enough, but none of them anchoring me in the presence of Christ.

As Holy Week begins, I am drawn again to a simple yet profound truth: our stability does not come from our own competence but from Christ's presence. Slowly but surely, I am learning to embrace the gifts He has given and to rest in the certainty that His grace is sufficient.

Recently, I found an unexpected sense of peace while watching recordings of my evening sermons at home. What could have been unsettling instead became a quiet reassurance: Jesus is at work, even through my imperfections. He does not call me because I am flawless; He calls me because He is faithful.

And isn't that the very pattern of Holy Week itself? The disciples, despite walking closely with Jesus, still faltered. Peter denied Him. Thomas doubted. The others scattered in fear. And yet, Jesus remained unwavering in His mission. In the face of betrayal, rejection, and the looming shadow of the cross, He pressed forward.

Holy Week reminds us that the call to follow Jesus is not about our ability to hold ourselves together. It is about surrender. It is about allowing His presence to anchor us when doubts rise. It

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is about stepping forward—not because we feel strong, but because we trust the One who goes before us.

– Pastor Eric

Chapter 7

Holy Week: Following

Day 41: Listening as an Act of Love

"Love one another as I have loved you." — John 13:34

To listen well is to love well. This is not mere sentimentality, nor simply a useful skill for maintaining relationships—it is a participation in the very life of God. The way we listen—attentively, patiently, and without rushing to respond—reflects the way God listens to us.

Jesus was the master of deep, transformative listening. He did not merely hear words; he perceived the heart behind them. When Nicodemus came to him by night, Jesus listened beyond theological curiosity to the unspoken longing for a new birth (John 3). When the rich young ruler approached him, seeking eternal life, Jesus listened beyond the surface of his question to the conflicted desires of a divided heart, weighed down by earthly attachments (see Matthew 19:16–22, Mark 10:17–22, or Luke 18:18–23). And when blind Bartimaeus cried out for mercy, Jesus did not assume his need; he asked, listened, and then healed him (Mark 10:46–52).

Listening in this manner is an act of loving self-giving, a way of embodying Christ's redemptive presence. Lent invites us to practice this kind of listening—not merely as a discipline, but as an active, transformative expression of love.

Reflective Questions:

1. When have you experienced the transformative power of being truly heard, as seen in the lives transformed by Jesus' encounters with Nicodemus, the rich young ruler, or Bartimaeus? How did that experience change you?
2. In what areas of your life might God be inviting you to listen more deeply—not just to words, but to the unspoken longings and needs behind them?

Deeper Reflection:

- Jesus' listening was never passive; it was an active, redemptive force. How might your listening—whether to a friend, a stranger, or even an adversary—serve as a tangible expression of Christ's love in the world?
- If listening is a participation in God's own loving nature, how might it transform not only your relationships but also your prayer life, sense of calling, and overall presence in the world?

Day 42: The Cross and the Radical Call

"If anyone wants to come after me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." – Matthew 16:24

Jesus' words here are not mere religious poetry; they are a summons to a way of life that turns the world upside down. The cross, in the first century, was not a decorative symbol but an instrument of Roman oppression, designed to strike terror into the hearts of those who dared to challenge the empire. And yet, Jesus takes this emblem of suffering and shame and transforms it into the very pattern of discipleship.

To follow Jesus is to embrace a reality where power is found in weakness, where victory comes through apparent defeat, and where true life is discovered only in surrender. This is not an invitation to private spirituality or personal self-improvement. It is a call to die to the illusions of control, self-preservation, and worldly success. It is to step, willingly, into the path of sacrificial love, trusting that in losing ourselves for Jesus' sake, we will truly find life.

This is not about adding religious effort to our already busy lives; it is about reordering everything around the reality of the cross. It is about seeing the world—and our place in it—through the lens of God's self-giving love.

So we must ask: Are we content to admire Jesus from the sidelines, affirming his teaching while keeping our own ambitions intact? Or are we willing to let his call reshape everything—our identity, our priorities, our very sense of self?

Reflection:

- 1 In what areas of your life are you resisting the call to deny yourself and follow Jesus?
- 2 How is Jesus inviting you to trust him more deeply, even at the cost of your comfort or security?

Deeper Reflection:

- If you were to truly take up your cross and follow Jesus in every area of life, what would have to change? What fears or attachments keep you from stepping fully into his radical way of love?

Day 43: The Courage to Face What We Avoid

"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." – Joshua 1:9

Courage, in the way of Jesus, is not mere heroism, nor is it the absence of fear. True, radical courage is the quiet, steady resolve to walk toward what we would rather avoid—the difficult

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conversations, the uncomfortable truths, the callings that seem too great for us. Avoidance, though subtle, is one of the most formidable barriers to faithfulness.

But why do we avoid certain things? The wounds of the past can make us hesitant. The fear of failure, rejection, or exposure tempts us to stay hidden. Yet the gospel is, at its core, a summons into the light. Again and again, Jesus meets people where they are, precisely in the places they have hidden themselves. Peter, after his denial, is not left to his shame but called to love and lead. Thomas, in his doubt, is not scorned but invited to touch and believe. The risen Christ does not stand at a distance; he moves toward those who are afraid, and he moves toward you.

Lent is a time for courage—not the courage of self-sufficiency, but the courage of surrender. To name what we fear, to bring it before God, is to discover that he is already at work there. Wherever he calls us, he has already gone before us.

Reflective Questions

- 1 What is one thing you sense God calling you to confront—perhaps in your heart, your relationships, or your vocation—that you have resisted?
- 2 How might your reluctance reveal deeper places where God is inviting you to trust him more fully?
- 3 Where do you need to shift from avoidance to faithful obedience?

Deeper Reflection:

If Jesus were to look into your eyes today and ask, "*Why are you avoiding this?*"—how would you answer? And what do you think his response would be?

Day 44: Avoidance and the Life We Miss

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and a sound mind." – 2 Timothy 1:7

We live in an age of avoidance. We shrink back from difficult conversations, preferring the illusion of peace over the challenge of reconciliation. We hesitate to step into our calling, fearing failure more than the loss of purpose. We resist discomfort, mistakenly believing that comfort is the same as flourishing.

But avoidance does not preserve life—it diminishes it. The kingdom of God does not advance through timidity, nor does it grow in the soil of self-preservation. It moves forward through the bold, trusting steps of those who believe that Christ is already present in the struggle.

Jesus did not avoid the path set before him. He walked deliberately into the heart of human suffering, embracing rejection, humiliation, and even death. And yet, in that very place of

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apparent defeat, life itself was born anew. The resurrection is not merely a vindication of Christ's suffering; it is a declaration that true life is found precisely in the places we fear to go.

If we are in Christ, then avoidance is not an option. To follow Jesus means to walk where he walks—not in fear, but in faith, trusting that where he leads, life follows.

Reflective Questions:

1. In what areas of your life has avoidance subtly shaped your decisions, and how has it affected your spiritual journey?
2. What fear is keeping you from stepping into the fullness of what God is calling you to?

Deeper Reflection:

- If avoidance leads to stagnation, what might it mean for you to embrace risk as an act of faith
 - Where is God calling you not simply to survive, but to truly live?
-

Day 45: Called to the Messy Work of Love

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." – **1 Peter 2:9**

The call of God is never merely a private invitation to inner peace. It is always a summons into the wide and often chaotic landscape of God's redemptive work. To be chosen by God is to be drawn into the very life of Christ—into the work of healing, restoring, and bearing witness to his light in the darkest corners of the world.

This is what it means to be a *royal priesthood*. Not a passive title, but an active vocation. Priests stand in the gap between heaven and earth, bringing the cries of the world before God and carrying the love of God into the world. This calling is not neat and controlled; it is often costly and disruptive. To follow Jesus means stepping into places of pain, speaking words of hope where there is despair, choosing love when indifference would be far easier.

This is precisely what Christ did. He did not remain at a distance from suffering—he stepped into it. He touched the unclean, welcomed the outcast, and bore the weight of the world's sin. And he calls us to do the same. The peace of Christ is not found in the careful maintenance of personal comfort, but in the self-giving love that risks everything for the sake of another.

Reflection:

- 1 Where in your life is Jesus calling you not just to serve, but to be present in a way that costs you something?

- 2 How does embracing the "messiness" of love challenge your assumptions about what it means to be holy?

Deep Reflection:

- If Jesus' love was never abstract but always embodied—touching, weeping, healing, sacrificing—what might it mean for your own life to be a tangible reflection of his love? Where is he calling you to step in rather than step away?

Day 46: Easter

Easter: He Is Risen! He Is Risen Indeed!

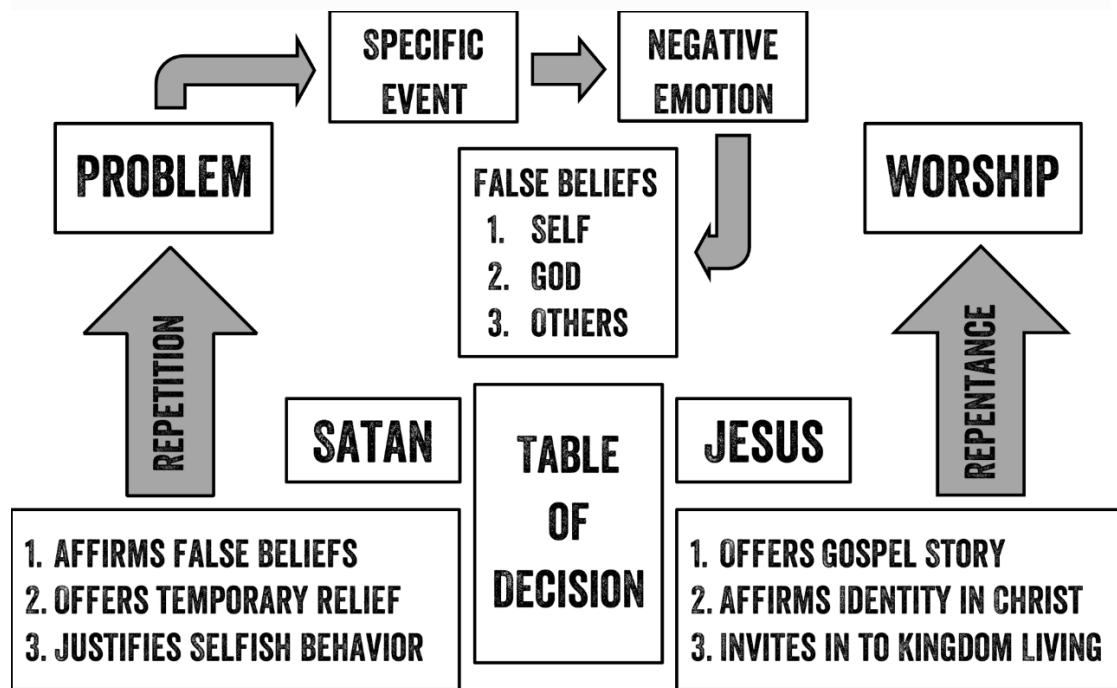
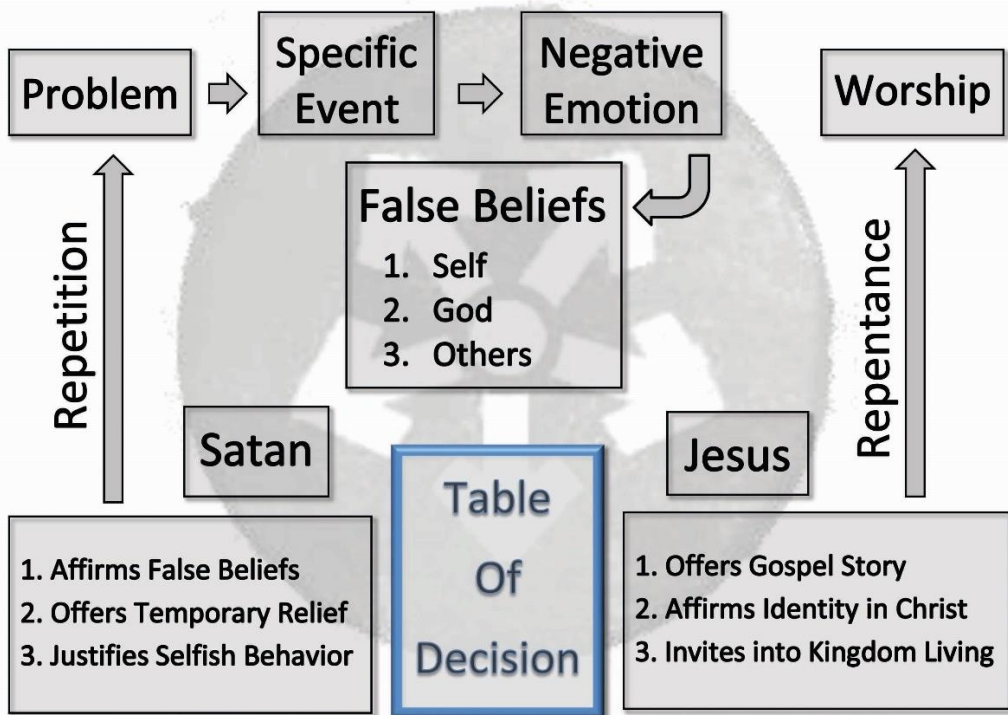
I love Easter. The resurrection is the foundation of our hope—the reason why death, though real, is neither final nor defining. It is why I miss my mother, yet do not grieve as those without hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). I know I will see her again. The empty tomb changes everything.

But I haven't always felt this way. As a child, Easter mostly meant uncomfortable clothes, long services, and the heat of a spring morning. I knew it was important, but I didn't grasp why. It felt like an annual event rather than the turning point of history. Now, I see it clearly. Without the resurrection, Paul says, we are to be pitied above all people—our faith would be nothing more than self-delusion (1 Corinthians 15:19). But Christ is risen. The new creation has begun, and with it, everything has changed.

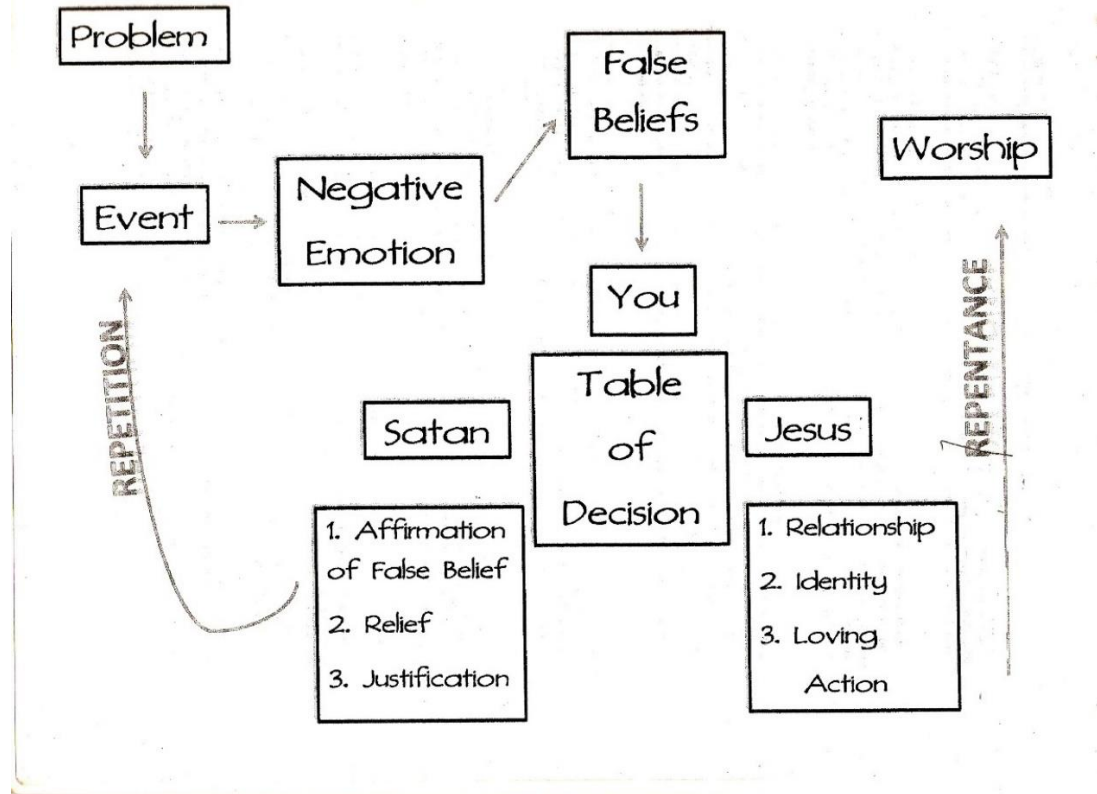
The risen Jesus doesn't just give us hope for the future; he transforms the present. Because he lives, he has poured out his Spirit (John 16:7), and through him, we have access to the Father (Ephesians 2:18). I no longer belong to one fixed place—I am a *mobile dwelling* for Jesus, a walking temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Wherever I go, the Kingdom of God is at work. His Spirit within me intercedes, groaning with prayers deeper than words (Romans 8:26).

Easter is not just about an event in history; it is about the truth that we are never alone again. The risen Christ stands among us, speaking peace to our fears (John 20:19), calling us by name (John 20:16), and commissioning us to carry his presence into the world. **Christ is risen. Everything is different now.**

The Many Table of Decision/Hot Seat Diagrams



Lent: An Inward Look



The Reason for the Hot Seat Model: 1 Peter 5:8

8 Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. (NIV)

