

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth

A Wayfarer's Journey Through Grace

By Skyler Thomas

With Original Songs and Devotionals

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth

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Dedication

To those still in the swamp,
who haven't yet heard the call.

To those at the water's edge,
learning what it means to be washed clean.

And to those walking in unforced rhythms,
discovering that grace is not just sufficient—
it's everything.

This is your story too.

And most important, to my loving wife and children who didn't leave
me when things got at their worst. You make life pure joy.

Table of Contents

Introduction: The Wayfarer's Anthem

MOVEMENT 1: IN THE SWAMP (The Struggle)

1. My Swamp
2. But Then I Prayed
3. STOP!! And Make a Decision
4. Dying Changes Everything

MOVEMENT 2: AT THE WATER'S EDGE (The Turning)

5. Living Waters Edge
6. In the Shadow of Your Grace
7. Amazing Grace I Did Receive
8. Dig a Little Deeper

MOVEMENT 3: UNFORCED RHYTHMS (The Transformation)

9. Unforced Rhythms of Grace
10. Deep Roots, Strong Growth

- 11. Redemption's Story**
- 12. Nothing is Wasted**
- 13. Devil's On The Run**
- 14. Living in the Moment**

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Introduction)

The Wayfarer's Anthem

"I used to think love was something I earned. Then I met it in a swamp. Covered in mud, gasping for air, convinced I was too far gone—that's when I felt it. Not a rescue that pulled me out immediately, but a presence that sat with me in the muck and whispered, 'I'm here. I've been here the whole time. And I'm not leaving.'"

Who This Book Is For (And What It's Really About)

Are you tired? Not just physically tired—soul tired. The kind of tired that sleep doesn't fix.

Do you ever lie awake at night wondering if there's more to life than what you're experiencing? Do the achievements feel hollow? Do the relationships feel exhausting? Does the constant striving to prove you're enough feel... well, like it's never enough?

If any of that resonates, this book might be for you.

Because here's what I've discovered: there's another way to live. Not perfect. Not easy. But different. Better. More real.

And you don't have to figure it out alone.

Now, I need to be honest with you about something: this is a book about finding something more. And that "something more" is a spiritual connection—but probably not the kind you're thinking of.

This isn't about religion. It's not about joining a church or converting to any particular faith tradition. But yes, I'm going to introduce you to some faith-based authors. Yes, I'll cite passages from the Holy Bible. Because these ancient texts and thinkers have mapped this journey before us, and their wisdom matters.

Here's what this book IS about: introducing you to a God who created you and loves you exactly where you are right now. Not where you should be. Not where you wish you were. Right where you are.

If you've never been to church, that's okay. You might actually have an advantage—fewer bad experiences to unlearn.

If you walked away from church years ago, I get it. I did too. The institution failed a lot of us. But this isn't about going back to what hurt you.

If you're not sure you even believe in God, stick with me. I'm not asking you to sign a statement of faith. I'm inviting you into a story—mine, and maybe yours—about what happens when you stop pretending and start being honest.

Here's the thing: I'm going to talk about God. About Jesus. About finding something real in the middle of the mess.

But I'm not going to ask you to believe it all right now. I'm just asking you to consider: *What if there's a Love that meets you exactly where you are? What if you don't have to clean yourself up first? What if the brokenness you're carrying is the exact place where healing begins?*

This is what I mean by "spirituality" instead of "religion":

Religion says: Follow the rules, perform well, measure up, and maybe you'll be acceptable.

Spirituality says: You're already known. Already seen. Already loved. Now come find out what that means.

I talk about **God** not as some distant cosmic force or angry judge, but as the source of the love you've been searching for your whole life. The kind of love that doesn't depend on your performance. That doesn't quit when you mess up. That runs toward you, not away from you.

I talk about **Jesus** not as a religious figure on a stained-glass window, but as God choosing to step into human skin. To live our life. To feel our pain. To show us what Love looks like with hands and feet. He didn't come to start a religion. He came for people who were drowning—people like you and me.

I talk about **the Spirit** not as some spooky religious concept, but as the presence of God that can actually live in you. That whispers truth when you're believing lies. That gives you strength when you have none left. That transforms you from the inside out.

Why would any of this matter to you?

Because maybe you've tried everything else.

Maybe you've tried achieving your way to meaning. Working harder. Making more money. Finding the right relationship. Filling the void with whatever you could find. Maybe you've even tried to just be a better person through morality (whatever that is). And if you're honest, it's all come up short.

Not because you're doing it wrong. But because you were designed for something deeper. Something that doesn't break when life breaks. Something that doesn't end when your heart stops.

An old theologian named Augustine said it like this: *"Our hearts are restless until they rest in You."*

That restlessness you feel? That ache for more? That's not a flaw. That's your soul telling you there's something real to find.

Here's what I'm NOT doing:

I'm not trying to get you to join a church (though finding a good community later might help).

I'm not asking you to become religious (please don't).

I'm not going to quote a bunch of Bible verses at you like proof-texts (though I will tell you some ancient stories that might surprise you).

Here's what I AM doing:

I'm inviting you to consider that the God you might have given up on never gave up on you.

I'm showing you what it looked like when I stopped running and started being honest.

I'm suggesting that the swamp you're in might be the exact place where you finally meet Love.

If you're thinking: *"I don't know if I buy any of this God stuff..."*

Good. Questions are allowed here. Doubt is part of the journey. You don't have to have it all figured out to keep reading.

If you're thinking: *"I've been hurt by religious people..."*

I'm sorry. Truly. The system fails people all the time. Hypocrites are real. Church can wound. But please don't confuse the failure of religious people with who God actually is.

If you're thinking: *"Why should I give this a try?"*

Because you picked up this book for a reason. Something in you is still searching. Still hoping. Still wondering if there might be more.

And I'm here to tell you: I believe there is.

Not religion. Not performance. Not rules.

But a Love that wades into your swamp.

A grace that meets you exactly where you are.

A Life that doesn't end when this one does.

This book is for the messy, the broken, the burned-out, the skeptical, the searching.

It's for people who know they don't have it all together and are tired of pretending otherwise.

If that's you, keep reading.

Let's walk together.

Setting the Scene: The Crash

You know that moment when you can't keep pretending anymore?

For me, it came in whispers:

"I can't do this anymore."

Eight words. Not eloquent. Not packaged. Just real.

And honesty—raw, desperate honesty—became my first step toward something better.

Then my world crumbled into pieces I could hardly recognize.

The Crisis and the Promise

It was more than burnout. It was a moral breakdown—an unraveling of the life I'd tried to hold together. My performance-based identity collapsed. I crossed boundaries those closest to me couldn't accept. As a leader, husband, and father, I lost the trust that defined my identity.

What remained? Shame. Emptiness. And the desperate hope that I could still be loved.

But here's what I discovered:

Love meets us exactly where we are. Not where we should be. Not where we pretend to be. Exactly where we are—mud and all.

My Story of Burnout

Everything looked right from the outside. Working harder. Mentoring people at work. Involvement in community. Being a good family man. People looked to me as an example of service and commitment.

But underneath? Relationships fracturing in ways I couldn't control or understand.

At work, conflict I couldn't navigate. Conversations that went sideways no matter how carefully I tried. My boss pulled me aside one day with words that landed like a punch: the dynamic wasn't working, and I was part of the problem. What?! I had no idea. But surely I could have recognized the signs.

At home? Even worse. The kind of tension you can feel in the air before anyone says a word.

I was trying so hard. Pouring hours into teaching. Creating content. Showing up for people. But internally? Drowning. Wondering if I could make any of it work. Wondering if anyone noticed I was falling apart.

Then the facade crumbled.

What I'd been hiding—what I'd managed to keep in the shadows while maintaining the appearance of having it all together—could no longer stay hidden.

And the institution I'd trusted? The community I'd served so faithfully? They didn't know how to handle brokenness. No resources for restoration. Only consequences. Instead of healing, I heard condemnation. Instead of compassion, I felt rejection.

It felt like friendly fire—wounded by the very people who were supposed to carry my burdens. The ancient wisdom says, "Carry each other's burdens." Instead of being carried, I was crushed.

So I walked away.

Into the swamp of shame, isolation, and despair. Into a place where the questions were bigger than the answers and the pain was more real than the platitudes.

Henri Nouwen, the brilliant writer who himself walked through seasons of severe depression, named what I was experiencing:

"There is a deep hole in your being, like an abyss. You will never succeed in filling that hole, because your needs are inexhaustible... You have to work around it so that gradually the abyss closes. Since the hole is so deep and your anguish so total, you run away from it, afraid that you will fall into it." — Henri Nouwen, The Inner Voice of Love

That abyss—that bottomless hole—I'd spent years trying to fill it with performance of hard work and good deeds, community approval, maintaining the image, and working more hours to accomplish tasks in order to make me feel better about myself. But in the swamp, I was too tired to run. And I no longer resisted moral temptation. Now I had to look at it. I had to face what I'd been avoiding.

Maybe you can't relate to my specific story. The details might be different.

But perhaps you know someone who's walked a similar path. Or maybe you've walked a different path with the same ending: wounded to the point of wanting out. Standing in the wreckage where the pieces can't be put back together.

That's where this journey begins.

Not in victory, but in the swamp. Not with all the answers, but with the honesty to admit we don't have them.

The Years of Performance

For years, I'd been what one writer called "the impostor"—the false self shaped by others' expectations rather than who I really was. He wrote:

"The impostor is a liar, a phony, a hypocrite. It is the self presented to the world to gain approval, to win esteem, to be admired. But it's not who you really are. Living as an impostor means living a lie..." — Brennan Manning, Abba's Child

That was me.

As "a leader" who felt nothing. I was giving advice I didn't believe. The person quoting wisdom while drowning in doubt. The "strong one" who was actually drowning.

The years kept accumulating. More money. Recognition. People saying, "Your teaching has really helped me." Being seen as a technical expert at work. And all the while, the exhaustion grew beneath the performance like water seeping into a foundation, slowly undermining everything.

Then came the moment when the façade cracked.

I can still see it clearly—the counseling session where I finally said out loud: "I don't know if I believe any of this anymore."

The words hung in the air like a confession at a trial.

I waited for condemnation.

But what came instead was terrifying freedom. The freedom of admitting: "I can't do this anymore."

The Journey Metaphor: Three Movements

So where does this journey take us?

This book follows three movements—three stages of the journey from performance to authenticity, from drowning to dancing, from the swamp to the unforced rhythms of life.

Movement 1: The Swamp

This is where we're stuck. The quicksand of shame. The muck of failure. The waters of despair rising.

Dark water you can't see through. The smell of rot. Heavy silence. Muck that clings and pulls. Everything exhausting.

This isn't just depression (though it might include that). This isn't just spiritual dryness (though that's part of it).

This is the accumulated weight of years of performing instead of being. Conversations that felt hollow. Service that felt like work. Community that felt like critique. Meaning that became a burden instead of a gift.

An ancient writer knew this place:

*"Save me, O God, for the floodwaters are up to my neck.
Deeper and deeper I sink into the mire; I can't find a
foothold. I am in deep water, and the floods overwhelm me.
I am exhausted from crying for help; my throat is parched.
My eyes are swollen with weeping, waiting for my God to
help me." — Psalm 69:1-3 (NLT)*

Worn out calling for help.

That's the swamp.

Pause and consider: Have you ever felt this way? That sinking feeling, the exhaustion of trying to keep it all together?

Why spend so many chapters talking about the swamp?

Because it isn't a niche struggle—it's epidemic. The swamp shows up everywhere. In the writings of thinkers across centuries. Because it is the universal human condition.

It's so common that many never even stop to name it. For some, it becomes the assumed backdrop of life: heavy, stagnant, normal. Others rationalize it, assuming that true depth requires long seasons of despair.

And candidly? There are millions who don't even realize life doesn't have to be this way. They've made peace with the swamp because they've never glimpsed the possibility of another kind of life.

That's why it matters to pause here.

Because until we name the swamp for what it is, we can't imagine leaving it.

Movement 2: The Water's Edge

The transition space.

You've dragged yourself (or been dragged) out of the swamp. Now you're at the edge of something clean, something clear. Living water. The kind that refreshes. That quenches real thirst. That becomes a spring within you.

But you're terrified to step in.

Why? Because you're filthy. Covered in swamp muck. Reeking of failure and shame. You're convinced the water will reject you. That you need to clean up first before you can approach.

This is where love does its most subversive work.

Where you discover that the invitation isn't "Clean yourself up and then come."

It's "Come as you are, and restoration will find you."

An ancient letter put it this way: *"But because of great love for us, the Source of all mercy made us alive even when we were dead in our broken patterns—it is by radical kindness you have been saved."*

Even when we were dead. Even when we were in the swamp.

That's when healing came.

Movement 3: Unforced Rhythms of Life

Life after surrender.

Not perfection, but participation. Not arrival, but walking.

There's an ancient invitation that speaks to this:

"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light." — Matthew 11:28-30 (NLT)

Unforced rhythms—that's what this final movement is about.

Picture someone who's learned to swim—or better yet, learned to float. Still in the water, but no longer fighting it. No longer exhausting yourself trying to stay afloat through sheer effort. Learning to rest in the water that holds you.

One spiritual teacher captured the essence of what the world needs most:

"The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as 'people of Christ' will become

disciples—students, apprentices, practitioners—of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence." — Dallas Willard, The Great Omission

The unforced rhythms are about becoming apprentices—not of a religious system, but of a way of life. Learning to live sustainably, authentically, in the flow of grace rather than the grind of performance.

Setting Expectations

So what can you expect from this book?

This isn't a how-to book. I don't have five steps to fix your life.

What I have is a story—mine, and maybe yours too. What I have is fourteen songs that became fourteen chapters that became a map through the swamp.

What I have is the conviction that love is real, that it's for wayfarers like us, and that it meets us exactly where we are.

One writer put it this way:

"The broken human is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: we are rebels who must lay down our arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realizing that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground up—that is the only way out of our 'hole.'" — C.S. Lewis

This book is about laying down arms.

About surrendering the self-salvation project. About admitting we've been on the wrong track and getting ready to start over.

It's about discovering what one ancient teacher discovered: *"When I am weak, then I am strong."*

That the swamp—the place of weakness, brokenness, and desperation—is exactly where transformation happens.

The Songs as Spiritual Markers

Each chapter centers on a song.

These aren't illustrations of the teaching—they're the heart of it. Each song was written in a specific season, in a specific struggle, and became a waypoint on the journey. The book is the story behind the songs. The songs are the soundtrack of healing.

When you reach each chapter, I'll invite you to listen first, read second. Let the music do what music does—bypass your defenses and touch the ache directly. Then we'll unpack it together.

The ancient Psalms taught me this. They're not theological treatises set to music. They're prayers that became songs. Laments that became worship. Honest cries that became sacred text.

David didn't write about crying out in the cave. He cried out, and that cry became a psalm.

These fourteen songs are my psalms: imperfect, incomplete, but honest.

And honesty is where healing begins.

Key Truth: Love in the Muck

A Word About "Scandal"

Throughout this book, I'm going to use the word "scandal" a lot. And I want you to understand why.

A scandal breaks the rules. It violates expectations. It offends sensibilities. It makes people uncomfortable because it doesn't fit the system they've built.

When I say love is "scandalous," I don't mean it's shocking in a tabloid sense. I mean it operates on principles that completely violate the economy we know—the economy of earning, deserving, performing, and paying back.

The scandal is this: In every system humans create, love has conditions. Acceptance has requirements. Forgiveness has limits. Acceptance has to be earned.

But love doesn't have to work that way.

Love says:

- "I love you when you're covered in swamp mud."
(Scandalous—shouldn't I have to clean up first?)
- "I forgive you before you've proven you've changed."
(Scandalous—shouldn't I have to earn it?)
- "I call you 'beloved' when you're still a mess."
(Scandalous—shouldn't I have to deserve that title?)
- "I meet you in the muck and call it holy ground."
(Scandalous—how can failure be holy?)

This is offensive to our sense of fairness. It violates our understanding of justice. It breaks every rule we have about how love should work.

That's the scandal.

Love isn't just nice. It's not just generous. It's revolutionary. Dangerous. World-upending.

If you could earn it, it wouldn't be free—it would be payment.

If you deserved it, it wouldn't be love—it would be obligation.

If you had to clean up first, it wouldn't be scandalous—it would be sensible.

But love doesn't do sensible. Love does scandalous.

Throughout this book, when you see the word "scandal," remember: it's not a problem. It's the point.

The scandal is what makes it love. The scandal is what makes it real. The scandal is what makes it for you.

Because if love only came to the deserving, you and I would still be in the swamp.

Here's the scandalous truth that changes everything:

Love doesn't wait for you to clean up. It wades into the muck with you.

And here's the scandal: it calls that muck 'holy ground.' Because anywhere you finally meet your true self IS holy ground—swamp mud and all.

Remember the ancient story of Moses at the burning bush? The voice said, *"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."*

Moses was standing in the wilderness. Tending sheep. Running from his past. Not in a temple. Not in a place of worship. In the wilderness.

And the voice said: This is holy ground.

The swamp becomes holy ground when you meet truth there.

Not because the swamp is good. But because honesty enters it. And wherever honesty is becomes sacred.

An ancient truth captures this: *"Love shows itself in this: While we were still broken, restoration came for us."*

While we were still.

Not after we cleaned up. Not once we got our act together. Not when we finally believed hard enough.

While we were still.

In the swamp. In the muck. In the middle of our mess.

The Wayfarer Identity

So who is a wayfarer?

Someone on a journey, often weary. A pilgrim. A traveler. A wanderer.

Not someone who has arrived, but someone honest enough to admit they're still on the road. Not someone perfect, but someone willing to keep walking.

The metaphor of journey saturates human wisdom:

- Abraham, called to leave everything familiar and go to a land he would discover as he went
- Ancient peoples, wandering years in the wilderness learning to trust
- Jesus, who had no place to lay his head
- The early spiritual seekers, who called their path "The Way"
- Ancient writers who described believers as "foreigners and strangers on earth" seeking "a better country"

Wayfarers know:

- **The road is long and we're not there yet** — We're still becoming who we're meant to be

- **We'll walk through swamps, deserts, and dark valleys** — Ancient wisdom promises the valley, not just green pastures
- **We don't travel alone** — The promise: *"I am with you always"*
- **The point isn't arrival; it's learning to walk authentically** — The call is to "walk humbly"
- **Authenticity matters more than appearance** — *"People look at the outward appearance, but the heart is what matters"*
- **Questions are allowed, doubt is part of the journey** — Even the faithful sent messengers asking, *"Are you the one, or should we expect someone else?"*
- **We're all just beggars telling other beggars where to find bread** — Martin Luther

One teacher describes this wayfaring path:

"The spiritual life is not a life of success but a life of faithfulness. It's not about never falling, but about getting back up. It's not about perfection, but about direction." — Richard Rohr, Falling Upward

Closing Image: The Traveler at the Trailhead

Picture a traveler at the beginning of a long road.

Pack on their back. Mud on their boots. Questions in their hearts.

They don't know exactly where the road leads. They don't know how long it will take. They don't know what they'll encounter along the way.

But they know two things:

1. They can't stay in the swamp.

2. They don't have to walk alone.

An ancient seeker, reflecting on his own journey from the swamp to wholeness, wrote these now-famous words:

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." — Augustine of Hippo, Confessions

That restlessness is mercy.

It's your soul refusing to settle for substitutes, calling you out of the swamp and onto the road.

So we begin.

Not with answers, but with honesty. Not with arrival, but with willingness to walk.

The journey is long.

But love is real.

And the Wayfarer's Anthem is this: **I can't do this alone. But I don't have to.**

Let's walk together.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Movement 1)

MOVEMENT 1: IN THE SWAMP (The Struggle)

"Love is closest to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." — Ancient wisdom

The swamp is where honesty begins.

For too long, we've been taught that strength means pretending everything is fine. That integrity means wearing our best face and smiling through the pain. That acceptance is for people who've cleaned themselves up just enough to deserve it.

The swamp says: no more.

The swamp is where we finally stop performing. Where we sink to our knees in the muck and admit: I'm not okay. I'm not strong. I'm not sure I even know what I believe anymore. I'm drowning, and I don't know how to save myself.

And here's the mystery: this is exactly where healing meets us.

Not in the polished conference room. Not in the perfectly curated social media post. Not in the moment we finally get our act together.

Love meets us in the swamp.

The ancient people knew the swamp—generations of oppression and bondage. David knew it—hiding in caves, running from enemies, writing poems of lament. Job knew it—loss, broken body, friends who offered platitudes instead of presence. Jonah knew it—literal fish belly, running from truth, discovering that you can't outrun what's real.

The swamp is not the enemy. The swamp is where pretending dies so that truth can live.

What This Movement Is About

Movement 1 is the movement of crisis. Of honesty. Of desperation that finally becomes prayer.

This isn't the "fix yourself" movement. This isn't the "seven steps to breakthrough" movement. This is the falling-on-your-face, crying-for-help, finally-admitting-you-can't-do-this-alone movement.

And here's what makes the swamp sacred: it's the only place where real healing can begin.

Because you can't heal what you won't name. You can't receive help if you're still pretending you don't need it. You can't be rescued if you're still convinced you can save yourself.

The swamp forces the question: Will you keep performing, or will you get honest?

Most of us spend years—sometimes decades—avoiding the swamp. We build platforms above it. We construct elaborate systems to keep us from sinking. We wear masks that say "I'm fine" while drowning inside.

But eventually, the platform collapses. The systems fail. The mask cracks.

And we find ourselves here. Knees in the muck. Water rising. No way to pretend anymore.

This is where the journey begins.

The Shift: From Performance to Honesty

If you're reading this book, chances are you've spent a lot of energy trying to appear okay.

Maybe you've been the strong one in your family—the one everyone leans on, the one who never breaks down, the one who holds it all together.

Maybe you've been the spiritual one—the one with the right answers, the encouraging words, the faith that never wavers (at least publicly).

Maybe you've been the successful one—the one who achieves, who produces, who proves their worth through accomplishments.

Or maybe you've just been the one who smiles and says "I'm fine" when you're falling apart inside.

The swamp is where all of that ends.

Not because you want it to end. But because you can't maintain it anymore. The weight of pretending has become heavier than the risk of being honest.

This movement is about making the shift from "I have to look okay" to "I need help."

From "I can handle this" to "I'm drowning."

From "Let me just work harder" to "God, if You're real, I need You."

That shift feels like failure. Like weakness. Like giving up.

But it's actually the beginning of everything.

The Metaphor: Sinking to Stand

There's an old story about a man caught in a flood. He climbs to his roof as the water rises. A boat comes by to rescue him, but he waves it away: "God will save me."

A helicopter appears overhead, dropping a ladder. He waves it away: "God will save me."

The water rises. He drowns. In heaven, he asks God, "Why didn't You save me?"

God replies: "I sent you a boat and a helicopter. What more did you want?"

The swamp is where we finally stop waving away the rescue.

We stop insisting we can handle it ourselves. We stop waiting for some magical moment when we'll suddenly have enough strength. We stop pretending the water isn't rising.

We reach up. We grab the rope. We cry out: "Help."

And here's the mystery: the moment we stop trying to save ourselves is the moment rescue becomes possible.

You have to sink before you can learn to stand on something other than your own strength.

You have to admit you're drowning before you can receive the life preserver.

You have to get honest about the swamp before you can find the path out of it.

This is the counterintuitive truth of Movement 1: weakness isn't the obstacle to rescue. Weakness is the prerequisite.

What You'll Discover in the Swamp

These four chapters will take you through the essential movements of crisis and honesty:

You'll learn to **name where you are** without sugarcoating it. The swamp is real. Your struggle is real. The exhaustion, the shame, the fear—all real. And naming it honestly is the first act of courage.

You'll learn to **pray without pretense**. Not the eloquent prayers you think you should pray, but the raw, desperate, honest cries that actually connect with what's Real. "Help" is a complete prayer. "I can't do this" is a complete prayer. "If You're there, I need You" is a complete prayer.

You'll learn to **make the decision** that changes everything. You can't stay in the swamp forever. At some point, you have to choose: Will I accept the help being offered, or will I keep insisting I can save myself?

You'll learn that **something has to die** before something new can live. The false self. The illusions of control. The belief that you can manage your own redemption. Death is terrifying. But it's also the doorway to resurrection.

This won't be comfortable. The swamp never is.

But it will be honest. And honest is the language healing speaks.

The Journey Through the Swamp:

Chapter 1: My Swamp - You recognize where you are. Stuck. Sinking. No longer able to pretend you're okay. This is the moment of brutal honesty: naming the swamp for what it is.

I Will Rise

Chapter 2: But Then I Prayed - In your desperation, you cry out. Not eloquent words—raw, honest, desperate words. And you discover that honest conversation with yourself, with the universe, with whatever you call the Divine—that's the language of authentic relationship.

But Then I Prayed

Chapter 3: STOP!!! And Make a Decision - You reach the crossroads. You can't stay in the swamp forever. Healing is offered, but it must be received. You have to choose: the swamp or the water's edge.

STOP!! And Make a Decision

Chapter 4: Dying Changes Everything - Something has to die. The false self. The illusions. The control. Death feels like the end, but it's actually the beginning. Before resurrection, there must be a tomb.

Dying Changes Everything

These four chapters don't offer quick fixes. They offer solidarity. They say: you're not alone in the swamp. You're not the first to sink. And somehow—mysteriously, miraculously—the swamp is where the journey toward healing begins.

Entering This Movement

Before you begin these four chapters, take a moment to prepare yourself. This isn't light reading. This is soul work.

Where is your swamp?

Not the metaphorical, theoretical swamp. Your actual swamp. The place where you're stuck right now. The situation that's draining you. The pattern you can't break. The shame you can't shake. The failure you can't escape.

Name it. Be specific. Don't soften it. Don't spiritualize it yet.

This is...

What are you afraid to admit?

What truth have you been avoiding? What weakness have you been hiding? What need have you been denying?

If you could be completely honest—with yourself, with God, with one other person—what would you say?

Practice saying it out loud right now. Even if it's just a whisper: "I'm not okay."

What would it cost you to get honest?

Would you have to drop the mask? Disappoint someone? Admit you need help? Let go of control?

The swamp requires honesty. And honesty requires courage.

Are you ready?

One more thing:

You don't have to be strong to enter the swamp. You just have to be honest.

You don't have to have faith figured out. You just have to be willing to cry out.

You don't have to know how this ends. You just have to take the next step.

So take a breath. Steady yourself. And step into the honesty that healing requires.

The swamp is waiting. But so is grace.

When you're ready, turn to Chapter 1: My Swamp.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 1)

MOVEMENT 1: IN THE SWAMP (The Struggle)

Chapter 1: My Swamp

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." — Augustine, Confessions

I Will Rise

Listen at: <http://go.skylertthomas.com/8o4Etw>



Scan to listen: I Will Rise

Before you read this chapter, I want you to know something.

If you're still reading, you're already curious. Maybe skeptical, but curious. That's enough.

This chapter is going to talk about the swamp—that stuck place where you've been living, maybe for years. It's going to name some hard truths. It's going to introduce you to some people who've been there and some ancient wisdom that speaks to it.

And at the end, I'm going to ask you to consider something. Just consider it—not commit to it, not sign up for anything. Just open your mind to a possibility you might not have thought about before.

A possibility that the stirring you feel, the restlessness, the longing—might be more than random. Might be something, or Someone, calling to you.

You don't have to believe it yet. You don't have to understand it all. You just have to keep reading.

Can you do that?

One more thing about the music.

Maybe you're not ready for it yet. I know it's going to have a spiritual slant to it. But just start listening.

Because I think you'll find much of it is a desperate plea for more than just my own limitations. It's a plea for something greater.

And that something greater—I hope you'll discover through this journey—is God's love in a way you may have never considered.

You know you're in the swamp when you start defending it.

When someone asks if you're okay and you snap back, "I'm fine." When a friend gently suggests you might need help and you list all the reasons why your situation is different, more complicated, not what it looks like from the outside. When you catch yourself explaining why you have to stay—why leaving isn't an option, why this is just how life is, why everyone else simply doesn't understand.

The swamp doesn't announce itself with a sign. It's not marked on any map. You don't wake up one day and think, "Ah yes, I've arrived at my personal hell." It creeps in. A compromise here. A numbing behavior there. A toxic relationship you've learned to navigate. A performance you maintain because it's easier than being honest. A shame you carry that's become so familiar you can't imagine living without its weight.

And here's what makes the swamp so dangerous: you get functional in it. You learn to breathe the toxic air. You figure out where to step to avoid sinking deeper. You develop a routine, a rhythm, a way of existing that looks normal from the outside while you're dying on the inside.

This chapter is about the moment you stop defending and start seeing. When the explanations fall away and you're left with the raw truth: this place was never meant to sustain life. And you can't keep pretending it does.

The writing that follows came from my moment of seeing. Not in a flash of revelation, but in a slow, painful recognition that I'd built a life in a place that was killing me. And the first step toward freedom wasn't a grand gesture—it was simply admitting the truth: This is my swamp. And I'm drowning in it.

Key Themes

1. The Geography of Disconnection

The swamp is where connection dies. From yourself. From others. From what's real and true. In the swamp, you stop asking if you're loved and start wondering if you're even lovable. You stop reaching out and start shutting down.

Brené Brown, whose research has explored human connection for decades, puts it this way:

"Connection is why we're here; it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. The power of connection and the fear of disconnection have driven human behavior since the beginning of time." — Brené Brown, Daring Greatly

Connection is oxygen for the soul. Cut it off long enough, and something inside you begins to suffocate.

That's what the swamp does—it suffocates connection. And without connection, you slowly die inside.

Let's be honest about what the swamp actually is:

Dark water, murky and opaque. You can't see the way out. The muck clings to you, pulls at you. Everything feels heavy—your clothes, your limbs, your thoughts. And you can taste it in the back of your throat. Bitter. Like swallowing failure.

This isn't just depression (though it might be that too). This is years of performing instead of being. Conversations that ricochet off walls. Connection that feels like clocking in. Community that tastes like judgment. Meaning that stopped being a gift and became a weight you can't carry anymore.

2. The Abyss Within

Ever feel like there's a bottomless hole inside you? Like no matter what you achieve, acquire, or accomplish, it's never enough?

One writer, reflecting on what truly sustains us in dark times, wrote:

"When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand." — Henri Nouwen, Out of Solitude

This is what the swamp teaches us: we don't need people to fix us. We need people to sit with us. To acknowledge the ache. To stop pretending they have all the answers and simply be present to the pain.

There's an ancient song—thousands of years old—that gives voice to this experience. It's the only one that begins and ends in darkness:

"I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death... You have thrown me into the lowest pit, into the darkest depths... Why do you turn your face from me?... Darkness is my closest friend." — Psalm 88 (NLT)

The song never resolves. It ends with "darkness is my closest friend." No neat bow. No triumphant turnaround. Just brutal honesty.

Sometimes lament without resolution IS the truth. Sometimes darkness IS the companion.

And that honesty? It matters.

3. The Death of the Impostor

Ever feel like you're playing a role? Like the person people see isn't really you?

Brennan Manning gave a name to this in *Abba's Child*:

"The impostor is the false self shaped by others' expectations rather than authentic inner promptings. The impostor thrives in places that reward the compliant, the performing, the image-maintaining. The impostor whispers: 'If they knew the real you—the doubting, struggling, messy you—they'd reject you.' So you hide. You perform. You maintain the image. And you die inside while looking alive outside." — Brennan Manning, Abba's Child

The impostor.

That was me. Not a liar, exactly. Just a performer. Shaped by what others expected. Driven by the hunger for approval. Terrified of being truly known.

I was the leader who felt nothing. The mentor dispensing advice I didn't believe. The person wielding wisdom like props while drowning in doubt.

Pause and consider: Who is your impostor? What mask are you wearing?

There's an ancient teaching that flips this whole performance thing on its head:

"God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him... God blesses those who mourn... God blesses those who are humble... God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice..." — Matthew 5:3-6 (NLT)

Translation: blessed are the spiritually bankrupt, the honest grievors, the powerless, the desperate.

The swamp is where the impostor dies.

I thought that was tragedy. I didn't yet know it was mercy.

4. Why We Stay Stuck

I stayed stuck for reasons I barely admitted to myself.

Fear whispers: *What if you cry for help and no one answers? Better the swamp you know than the silence you don't.*

Shame whispers: *Functional people don't feel like this. If they knew the real you, they'd be horrified.*

Exhaustion whispers: *You're too tired to move. The swamp is killing you, but at least it's predictable.*

Identity whispers: *If you're not the strong one, the competent one, the leader—who are you?*

Dallas Willard explains why the swamp is so exhausting. We cannot transform ourselves. We cannot make ourselves into the people we need to be. Every self-help program, every technique, every discipline—pursued as self-salvation—will fail. Not because the practices are bad, but because we're asking them to do something they

cannot do: save us.

As Willard writes in *The Great Omission*:

"Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning."

You cannot earn transformation by trying harder. But you can position yourself where transformation happens.

Here's the swamp's hidden curriculum: the self-salvation project is a lie.

I'd been trying to transform myself—more discipline, more service, more belief, more performance. I was exhausted because I was demanding from effort what only surrender can deliver.

5. The Soul's Restless Hunger

Ever feel like nothing satisfies? Like you keep searching for something but you don't even know what it is?

An ancient writer, sixteen hundred years ago, described it perfectly:

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. I carried my shattered self through streets and squares looking for something to fill the void. I tried honor, I tried pleasure, I tried philosophy, I tried religion. I threw myself into each with desperate intensity, hoping it would finally satisfy. But nothing did. Nothing could... The restlessness is a mercy. It's the soul refusing to settle for substitutes." — Augustine of Hippo, Confessions

The swamp is full of this gnawing ache—nothing works anymore. Not willpower. Not achievement. Not service.

But what if that restlessness is actually healthy? What if your soul is refusing to settle for worthless substitutes?

6. The First Cry for Help

This is where hope flickers. Barely. Because even the cry for help is a form of healing.

"If there's anything real out there—I can't do this anymore."

Not eloquent. Not sophisticated. But honest. And honesty—raw, desperate, unvarnished honesty—is the native language of transformation.

This is authenticity stripped to bone: *I can't. Help.*

Richard Rohr, in *Falling Upward*, talks about two kinds of suffering: necessary suffering and unnecessary suffering.

Unnecessary suffering is when you fight reality, blame others, stay in victimhood, and refuse to let the pain teach you. It's suffering that embitters rather than transforms.

Necessary suffering is when you enter the pain consciously, asking 'What is this teaching me? How is this changing me? Where is truth in this?'

The same suffering can be either necessary or unnecessary. The difference isn't the suffering itself; it's how you engage it. Necessary suffering breaks you open. And that breaking is grace, because only the broken can be filled.

The cry for help—*I can't do this anymore*—marks the shift from unnecessary to necessary suffering.

You stop fighting reality and start asking what it's trying to teach you.

Stories of the Swamp

Want to know something interesting? This swamp thing isn't new. People have been stuck in swamps for thousands of years. And some of their stories might sound familiar.

The Ancient Captives

There's a story about a group of people stuck for four hundred years. Generational swamp. They couldn't free themselves.

So they groaned. They cried out.

And the response?

"I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians..." — Exodus 3:7-8 (NLT)

Not "try harder." Not "fix yourself first."

I have come down to help them.

The Man in the Fish

Then there's this wild story about a guy in the ultimate swamp—literally inside a fish.

From that impossible place, he prays:

"I cried out to the LORD in my great trouble, and he answered me. I called to you from the land of the dead, and LORD, you heard me!... Those who worship false gods turn their backs on all God's mercies. But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise, and I will fulfill all my vows. For my salvation comes from the LORD alone." — Jonah 2:2, 8-9 (NLT)

Even from inside a fish, he names what he'd been doing: "clinging to worthless idols."

The swamp is where you discover that everything you've been clinging to is worthless. Every substitute. Every prop. Every false salvation.

The Fugitive in the Cave

And there's the fugitive hiding in a cave, writing this:

"I cry out to the LORD; I plead for the LORD's mercy. I pour out my complaints before him and tell him all my troubles... I look for someone to come and help me, but no one gives me a passing thought! No one will help me; no one cares a bit what happens to me." — Psalm 142:1-2, 4 (NLT)

He doesn't clean up his prayer. Doesn't spiritualize his pain. Doesn't pretend.

That honesty—that raw vulnerability—IS courage. The complaint IS the prayer.

The Core Truth

Here's where I need to be straight with you about something from scripture.

There's a letter written two thousand years ago that gets quoted a lot, but usually just one line: "While we were still broken, love died for us."

But here's the full passage, and it matters:

"When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son." — Romans 5:6-10 (NLT)

Four words describe where we were when love came: powerless, lost, broken, opposed.

That's the swamp. No ability to save yourself (powerless). No spiritual credentials (lost). Failing morally and spiritually (broken). Actively opposed to truth (enemies).

The text doesn't soften it. It names it. And then drops the bomb: WHILE we were still in that state—love came for us.

Not after we cleaned up. Not once we got our act together. Not when we finally mustered enough strength.

While we were still.

Swamp-dwellers. Muck-covered. Mid-mess.

This is why scripture is different from any other approach. It doesn't start with "get yourself together first." It starts with "you can't, and that's exactly when love shows up."

This is the scandal:

"Now what was the sort of 'hole' man had got himself into? He had tried to set up on his own, to behave as if he belonged to himself. In other words, fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realising that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground floor—that is the only way out of a 'hole.'" — C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

Here is the scandal and the glory: Love comes to you in the muck. Not after you've cleaned yourself up. Not once you've proven yourself worthy. In the muck. While you're still a rebel. While you're still in the swamp. That's where healing finds you.

Here's the swamp's hidden gift: it forces surrender. I'd tried everything else—more discipline, more service, more belief, more performance,

even more "morality" (being good). Nothing worked. So I did the only thing left: I laid down my arms.

And here's the glory: that's exactly when healing shows up. Not after you've cleaned yourself up. In the muck. Mid-swamp. While you're still broken and messy and desperate.

There's an ancient song—a testimony from someone who'd been exactly where you are—that captures this perfectly:

"I waited patiently for the LORD to help me, and he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along." — Psalm 40:1-2 (NLT)

Out of the slimy pit. Out of the mud and mire.

That's the swamp. And the promise isn't that you have to climb out yourself. The promise is that God reaches down into the muck and lifts you out.

Burned out. Swamp-stuck. Performance-exhausted.

Maybe that's you. I know it was me.

And the promise is this: He hears the cry. He lifts us out.

Not "clean up first." Not "try harder." Just come. As you are. Muck and all.

And I will give you rest.

The Wayfarer Moment

Admitting "I'm not okay" is the doorway to healing. The swamp is where pretending goes to die.

For years, I'd been pretending. Performing. Image-maintaining. And it was soul-crushing. Exhausting. Unsustainable.

The swamp strips away performance. When you're drowning, you stop caring about optics. You just want oxygen.

And that's exactly where healing begins.

The ancient poet modeled this vulnerability, written from a cave where he was hiding for his life. Brutally honest. Vulnerable. No pretending. No performance. He names isolation, abandonment, desperation.

The swamp forces vulnerability. You can't maintain the image anymore. You can't perform. You can't pretend.

It feels like death.

But it's actually courage.

This is how you become truly known. And only the truly known can be truly loved.

That admission—that raw honesty— isn't defeat.

It's the doorway.

Sawgrass Lake Park, St. Petersburg, FL

Song Integration

"I Will Rise" belongs in this chapter because it captures the theological heart of what it means to move from swamp to freedom: this is not self-rescue, but God-dependent hope. The song expresses the paradox at the center of spiritual transformation—we are utterly powerless to save ourselves, yet called to actively respond to grace.

The opening verse names the impostor self with unflinching honesty: *"I built these walls, I learned to fight, kept my heart locked up so*

tight... But I've been sinking all the while." This is the lament of someone who has maintained appearances while drowning inside. The song begins where transformation always begins—in truthful self-assessment, not pretense. Like the psalms of lament, it refuses to sugarcoat reality. God meets us in our honesty, not in our performance.

But the pre-chorus reveals where hope actually comes from: *"You pull me close, You draw me higher, out of the swamp, into the fire."* The agency belongs to God. We rise because we are lifted. We escape because we are drawn. This is cooperative grace—God initiating what only God can do, while we respond with the step we must take. The progression from swamp to fire is significant: we're not moving from pain to comfort, but from one kind of pain (the slow death of the swamp) to another (the purifying fire that burns away the false self and forges the true one).

The chorus functions as prophetic declaration, not positive thinking: *"I won't stay where shadows grow, where my heart turns cold, where the dark winds blow."* The song doesn't deny present reality; it refuses to accept it as permanent. This echoes Psalm 40's pattern of lament turning toward trust: "He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire." Rising is God's character, His pattern, His promise.

The bridge captures the Wayfarer Moment—the vulnerable decision to move even while trembling: *"I see the road, I see the dawn, and though I shake, I'll carry on. No more hiding, no more chains, Your grace is stronger than my pain."* Here is biblical faith: not the absence of fear, but trust in God's character despite fear. "No more hiding" means the death of the impostor, and the foundation for this vulnerability is grace—"stronger than my pain." Not my strength, not my willpower, but unearned love that pursues us into the swamp and refuses to leave us there.

The song functions as both prayer and testimony. As prayer, it's a cry for help acknowledging both desperation and hope. As testimony, it declares for others still stuck: "I am rising—not by my power but by grace—and so can you." The chapter teaches that restlessness is

mercy, the soul refusing to settle for substitutes. "I Will Rise" is that restlessness set to music, the refusal to accept the swamp as home.

The chapter ends with a whispered prayer: "Help." The song is the elaboration of that prayer—help me rise, help me trust, help me believe the swamp isn't the end of my story. This is the faith that saves: not perfect understanding or unwavering confidence, but the broken cry "I will rise," spoken to the God who has already promised, "I will lift you out."

Lyrics: I Will Rise

[Verse 1]

I built these walls, I learned to fight,
Kept my heart locked up so tight.
Hid my fear behind a smile,
But I've been sinking all the while.

[Pre-Chorus]

I hear You calling through the night,
A voice so strong, yet full of light.
You pull me close, You draw me higher,
Out of the swamp, into the fire.

[Chorus]

I won't stay where shadows grow,
Where my heart turns cold, where the dark winds blow,
I'm stepping out, I'm choosing life,

Leaving the swamp for the morning light.

Oh, I will rise... I will rise.

[Verse 2]

I made a home in sinking ground,

Afraid to leave, afraid to drown.

But chains aren't homes, and wounds don't heal

When I resist the love you reveal

The fear, the shame, the weight I've known,

You call me out, You lead me home.

[Pre-Chorus]

I hear You calling through the night,

A voice so strong, yet full of light.

You pull me close, You draw me higher,

Out of the swamp, into the fire.

[Chorus]

I won't stay where shadows grow,

Where my heart turns cold, where the dark winds blow,

I'm stepping out, I'm choosing life,

Leaving the swamp for the morning light.

Oh, I will rise... I will rise.

[Bridge]

I see the road, I see the dawn,

And though I shake, I'll carry on.
No more hiding, no more chains,
Your grace is stronger than my pain!

[Final Chorus]

I won't stay where shadows grow,
Where my heart turns cold, where the dark winds blow,
I'm stepping out, I'm choosing life,
Leaving the swamp for the morning light.
Oh, I will rise... I will rise.

[Outro]

No turning back, I'm walking free,
The past is gone, Your love in me.
The past is gone, Your love in me.
Oh, I will rise... I will rise.

Key Takeaways

- **Honesty is the doorway to healing.** You can't heal what you won't name. Stop defending the swamp and start seeing it for what it truly is—a place of disconnection and slow death.
- **Performance exhausts; authenticity frees.** The impostor self keeps you trapped in endless striving. Grace meets you as you are, not as you pretend to be.

- **Your restlessness is a mercy.** The deep thirst you feel isn't a flaw—it's your soul refusing to settle for substitutes and pointing you toward the living water you actually need.

- **Powerlessness is the prerequisite for grace.** God doesn't wait for you to clean up or prove yourself worthy. He reaches into the muck while you're still broken and says, "Come as you are."

Reflections for the Road

These aren't questions to answer quickly. They're invitations to be honest.

Questions for the Journey:

1. What is your swamp?

Not metaphorically. Specifically. Where are you stuck? What patterns have you normalized? What pain have you learned to live with?

Name it. Out loud if you can. In writing if you must. But name it.

2. How long have you been defending your swamp?

What explanations do you give? What justifications? "It's not that bad." "Everyone struggles." "I'm handling it."

What would happen if you stopped defending and started being honest?

3. What would it cost you to admit "I'm not okay"?

What identity would you lose? What image would crack? What expectations would you fail to meet?

And here's the harder question: What is staying in the swamp already costing you?

4. Who knows the real you—the swamp-dwelling, muck-covered, struggling you?

If no one knows, why not? If someone knows, what changed when you let them see?

The impostor thrives in isolation. Authenticity requires witness.

5. Read Psalm 88 slowly—the only psalm that begins and ends in darkness.

"Darkness is my closest friend." Does this honest lament give you permission to be honest about your swamp? What would it look like to pray like this—without pretending, without a neat ending?

6. How will you take one step toward admitting "I'm not okay" this week?

Not a giant leap. Just one step. Who will you tell? What will you stop defending? What honest conversation will you have?

Name one specific action. Make it small. Make it soon.

Practice: The Five-Minute Honest Conversation

Find a quiet space. Set a timer for five minutes.

And just be honest. Out loud if possible. In writing if necessary. In prayer if that's your language. In conversation with yourself if not.

Don't edit yourself. Don't soften it. Don't try to make it sound better. Just be honest.

Talk about the swamp. How long you've been there. What it feels like. What you're angry about, confused about, afraid of.

Talk about the performance. The exhaustion. The isolation. The shame.

Say "Help."

When the timer goes off, breathe.

Take a breath.

Time needed: 5 minutes

Tip for starting small: If 5 minutes of unfiltered honesty feels too long or overwhelming, start with just 2 minutes. Or if speaking out loud feels too vulnerable, write your honest thoughts in a journal instead. The goal is honesty, not eloquence or a specific format. Some people find it easier to be honest in writing first, then build up to speaking their truth aloud.

You've just spoken the most important truth: the real one.

The universe hears. Not because it was eloquent. Because it was true. And truth is the language healing speaks.

Closing Image

You're still in the swamp. Let's be honest. This isn't the rescue chapter. This is the honesty chapter. The naming chapter. The cry-for-help chapter.

The swamp hasn't vanished. You're still stuck. Feet still in muck. Water still murky. Way out still unclear.

But something shifted.

You've looked up.

For the first time in months—maybe years—you've stopped looking down at the muck, stopped looking around at the darkness, stopped

looking inward at the failure.

You've looked up.

And you see something you haven't seen in a long time: light. Just a glimmer. Just a hint. Filtering through the canopy. Weak, maybe. But real.

It's not much. Not the blinding sunrise. Not the dramatic breakthrough. Just... a sliver. A crack in the darkness. Proof that somewhere beyond this place, light exists.

You can't see the source yet. You can't see the full picture. You can't see the path out.

But you can see that the swamp isn't all there is. There's something beyond it. Above it. Outside it.

Take a breath.

For so long, you believed the swamp was your permanent address. That this stuck place, this numb place, this drowning place—this was it. This was all there was.

The light proves otherwise.

It doesn't fix anything. Not yet. The muck is still thick. The water is still dark. You're still sinking.

But the light changes the narrative.

Before: This is all there is. I'm stuck forever. There's no way out.

Now: There's something beyond this. Light exists. Maybe—just maybe—there's a way.

And in that moment—that brief, fragile, barely-there moment—hope flickers.

Not rescue yet. Just realization.

You can't save yourself.

And maybe—just maybe—that's okay. Maybe admitting "I can't" is the doorway to discovering "there is a way."

You look up again. The light is still there. Faint but real.

And you whisper the only honest prayer left: "Help."

It's a beginning.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 2)

MOVEMENT 1: IN THE SWAMP (The Struggle)

Chapter 2: But Then I Prayed

"I cry aloud to the LORD; I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy." — Psalm 142:1

But Then I Prayed

Listen at: <http://go.skylerthomas.com/swI2s8>



Scan to listen: But Then I Prayed

An Invitation to Consider

Before we dig into this chapter, I want you to consider something.

What if that stirring in the middle of the night isn't just anxiety or restlessness?

What if the God of the Universe—the God who created you—has been calling to you? Not with demands. Not with conditions. Just calling.

Wanting to hear from you. Wanting to speak to you.

I'm not asking you to believe everything right now. I'm not asking you to commit to a religion or join a church or sign a statement of faith.

I'm just asking you to consider: what if He's there? What if He's been there all along, waiting for you to turn toward Him?

You don't need a huge performance prayer. No religious jargon. No fancy words.

Just a simple prayer. Something like this:

"Yes, God. I want to listen to You. I want to consider what You may have to offer me from my swamp."

That's it. That's enough.

Because the God who created you doesn't need your eloquence. He just wants your honesty.

He doesn't need your strength. He just wants your willingness.

He doesn't need your certainty. He just wants you to crack the door open and say, "I'm listening."

What if that's all it takes? What if the turning point—the "but then I prayed" moment—is simply saying yes to the possibility that Someone is calling your name?

Can you do that? Can you just consider it?

If you're still here, consider it might not be an accident or coincidental.

Now what?

This chapter is about what happens when you finally run out of options. When you've tried everything and nothing works. When self-sufficiency collapses and you reach out—not with polished words, but with honest cries.

You might not call it prayer. Maybe you've never prayed before. Maybe prayer feels too religious, too formal, too... much.

That's okay. Because what I'm talking about isn't religious performance. It's honest conversation with whatever is Real, whatever is greater than yourself.

And if you're willing to consider that "whatever" might actually be Someone—that changes everything.

Keep reading.

Here's the pattern most of us follow when life falls apart:

First, we try to fix it ourselves. We strategize, problem-solve, work harder. We're competent—we've handled crises before.

When that doesn't work, we try to manage it. We numb the pain, stay busy, medicate with work (or substances), Netflix, food, scrolling—whatever keeps the darkness at bay.

When that stops working, we start bargaining. *If I just... If they would... If this changes...* Desperate negotiations from a position of no power.

And finally—only finally—when we've exhausted every other option, when we're flat on our backs with nothing left, we reach out. Not the polished words we learned growing up, but the raw, honest cries that are barely more than groans: "Help."

This chapter is about that moment. When self-sufficiency collapses. When all our strategies fail. When we run out of moves and discover

that running out of moves was the point all along.

Because reaching out isn't the last resort when everything else fails. It's the first reality we keep trying to avoid: we need help more than we need solutions.

The writing that follows came from a season when I learned to speak honestly instead of performing politely. When "But then I prayed" became the turning point in every valley I walked through.

Prayer—conversation with the Divine, with your deepest self, with what's Real—in the swamp doesn't look like prayer on the mountaintop (or in a flashy church setting). Mountaintop prayer is full of gratitude and joy, hands raised, voice strong. Swamp prayer is different.

Swamp prayer is:

- Groaning when words won't come: "And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words" (Romans 8:26, NLT)
- Crying out instead of composing: "I cry out to the LORD; I plead for the LORD's mercy" (Psalm 142:1, NLT)
- Complaining honestly instead of pretending piously: "O LORD, how long will you forget me? Forever? How long will you look the other way?" (Psalm 13:1, NLT)
- Questioning reality instead of defending platitudes: "LORD, why do the wicked prosper? Why are evil people so happy?" (Jeremiah 12:1, NLT)

In the swamp, you learn that honest conversation isn't about saying the right things. It's about saying the real things.

Henri Nouwen reflects on the prodigal son:

"The prodigal son's confession—'Father, I have sinned'—came not from a place of spiritual maturity but from the pigpen, from desperation, from coming to his senses in the midst of ruin." — Henri Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal Son

This is swamp prayer: painfully, uncomfortably, refreshingly honest.

No spiritual jargon. No performance. No pretending everything's fine when it's not. Just raw human beings crying out from the depths of their need.

And here's the scandalous truth: this kind of honesty is what healing prefers. Because honest conversation—even angry, doubting, or desperate—is still connection. Performance is isolation.

Key Themes

1. The Collapse of Self-Sufficiency

There's a moment in every swamp journey when you hit the wall: *I can't fix this.*

Not "I don't want to fix this." Not "I shouldn't have to fix this." But the deeper, darker admission: *I am incapable. I am insufficient. I am out of moves.*

Terrifying, especially if you're the one who always finds a way. The problem-solver. The strong one. The one others lean on. You've built your identity on competence, on handling it, on never letting them see you sweat.

And now you're drenched. You can't handle it. The problems won't yield to your strategies.

For me, it was the moment I realized: I couldn't think my way out. Couldn't work my way out. Couldn't perform my way out. I'd exhausted my toolkit. Every tool broken. And the avalanche was still

descending while I stood frozen.

"The spiritual life is not a life before, after, or beyond our everyday existence. No, the spiritual life can only be real when it is lived in the midst of the pains and joys of the here and now." — Henri Nouwen, Life of the Beloved

This is the swamp's paradox: it's not where the Divine is absent. It's where we finally stop pretending we don't need help.

Nouwen spent years at Harvard delivering polished lectures on spirituality. But it was only when he left academia to serve people with intellectual disabilities at L'Arche that he learned what he'd been teaching. In the mess. In the vulnerability. In the daily grind of caring for those the world deemed "broken," he discovered: healing meets us not in our competence but in our need.

The swamp isn't punishment. It's invitation.

When self-sufficiency collapses, we're faced with a choice: do we reach out, or do we keep trying to manage on our own? The nature of how we reach out reveals everything.

2. Reaching Out as Surrender, Not Strategy

Here's what we get wrong: The religious treat prayer like a vending machine. Insert the right words, push the right button (faith! persistence! positive thinking!), and out pops the answer we want.

But swamp prayer isn't strategy. It's surrender.

Not: "God, here's my five-point plan—please bless it."

But: "I'm out of plans. I'm placing this in hands larger than mine because mine are empty."

There's a canyon-wide difference between asking *for help to accomplish our will* and asking *for the wisdom to see what's truly needed*.

The first keeps us in the director's chair. We're still writing the script; we just need assistance.

The second surrenders the pen. We acknowledge the script might look different from ours—and we're willing to trust it anyway.

Jesus models this in Gethsemane:

"He walked away, about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.'" — Luke 22:41-42 (NLT)

Jesus wasn't in a swamp—he was sinless, facing something we could never face. But here he models the kind of prayer that's gut-wrenchingly honest to the bone. It's the kind of prayer we need when we're in our swamp:

"Father, I want this cup to pass. I'm being honest about that. But I trust You more than I trust my own desires. So I yield."

This is swamp prayer: not manipulating the universe, but yielding to what's real. Not demanding answers, but trusting the process.

Richard Foster writes:

"Real prayer comes not from gritting our teeth but from falling in love." — Richard Foster, Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home

When we see prayer as a burden, a duty, something we have to grit our teeth to accomplish, we've missed the point entirely. Prayer is not about spiritual calisthenics or religious performance. It's about relationship. It's about learning to notice presence, to recognize truth, to trust process. The Three R's framework helps us shift from trying harder to loving deeper—from striving to abiding.

This kind of surrender—not manipulation but yielding—creates the turning point every swamp story needs. It's the moment everything changes.

3. The Turning Point: "But Then I Prayed"

Every swamp story has a hinge. The moment despair meets hope. When resignation shifts to surrender. When the drowning person looks up.

The phrase "but then I prayed" marks that hinge.

I was drowning in anxiety... but then I reached out.

I was overwhelmed by grief... but then I spoke it.

I was consumed by fear... but then I asked for help.

I was paralyzed by shame... but then I told the truth.

The circumstances don't immediately change. The storm doesn't instantly calm. The problem doesn't magically resolve.

But **you** change. The moment you stop bearing it alone and bring it into the light—even if that light is just your own honest acknowledgment—power shifts.

You're no longer drowning silently. You're crying out. And crying out is the first act of defiance against the swamp.

Pause and consider: When was the last time you reached out—really reached out—for help?

But what does this kind of honest prayer actually sound like? How do we move beyond polished words to real conversation with God? The ancient practice of lament shows us the way.

4. The Language of Lament

Western culture has lost the art of lament. We're taught to be positive, to think optimistically, to "choose joy." All good things—until they're not. Until life is genuinely hard and those platitudes feel like betrayal.

The ancient Hebrew poets knew better. Nearly a third of the Psalms are laments—raw, honest, sometimes angry prayers that bring pain directly before the Divine without sugarcoating it.

"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help? Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer. Every night I lift my voice, but I find no relief." — Psalm 22:1-2 (NLT)

That's in the sacred texts. No apology. No caveat. Just honest anguish.

Lament says: *This is not okay. This hurts. And I'm bringing that hurt into the presence of love instead of pretending it doesn't exist.*

Brené Brown writes:

"Vulnerability is not winning or losing; it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome. Vulnerability is not weakness; it's our greatest measure of courage." — Brené Brown, Daring Greatly

Lament is vulnerability. It's the courage to name the pain instead of numbing it. To cry out instead of shutting down.

And here's what the swamp teaches: **God doesn't wait for us to clean up before drawing near. Love is closest to the brokenhearted. It saves the crushed in spirit.**

Not those who have it together. Not those who've earned it. Not those who speak perfectly.

The broken. The crushed. The desperate.

This is the scandal: Love doesn't wait for strength. It comes when we're weak. It doesn't seek the healthy; it comes to the sick.

"To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God." — Timothy Keller, The Meaning of Marriage

This is what prayer from the swamp offers: the chance to be fully known—muck and all—and discover you're still loved. We come to prayer not hiding our mess, but exposing it. Not pretending we have it together, but admitting we're falling apart. And that's exactly where love meets us.

"And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words." — Romans 8:26 (NLT)

Even when we don't know how to pray, the Spirit prays for us. Our groaning is enough. Our tears are enough. Our whispered "help" is enough.

Prayer isn't about eloquence. It's about honesty. And life itself translates our weakness into meaning.

Stories of Prayer

Throughout history, the most powerful prayers have come from the most desperate places.

Moses in Crisis (Exodus 32:11-13, NLT)

Moses is on the mountain receiving the Law—forty days and nights in God's presence, tablets being written by the finger of God Himself. But down below, the people have grown impatient. They've melted their gold jewelry and cast an idol, a golden calf, and are dancing around it, worshipping it.

God sees it. And His anger burns hot.

"I have seen these people," God tells Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them."

Moses is standing before the living God, hearing a divine sentence of destruction pronounced on an entire nation. The people he led out of Egypt. The people he's been shepherding through the wilderness. They're about to be annihilated.

This is the moment Moses could have stepped back, let God's justice fall, maybe even started over with a new people descended from him alone. But instead, Moses steps forward. And he prays—not safe, not polished, not deferential.

He argues with God. Reminds God of His promises. Intercedes desperately:

"But Moses tried to pacify the LORD his God. 'O LORD!' he said. 'Why are you so angry with your own people, whom you brought from the land of Egypt with such great power and such a strong hand?'" — Exodus 32:11 (NLT)

Moses prays honestly, boldly, desperately. He appeals to God's reputation, God's promises, God's character. And incredibly—God listens. God relents. The prayer changes the outcome.

The Tax Collector's Prayer (Luke 18:13, NLT)

Jesus tells a parable about two men who went up to the temple to pray. Picture the scene: the grand temple courts, people gathered for prayer, the religious elite visible and vocal.

The first man, a Pharisee, stands prominently where people can see him. His prayer is a performance: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

Everything about his prayer screams confidence. He's listing his resume. Comparing himself favorably to others. Standing tall.

The second man is a tax collector—a collaborator with Rome, a traitor to his own people, a man who's gotten rich by exploiting others. He knows what people think of him. He knows what he thinks of himself.

He stands at a distance. Not up front. Not visible. Back in the shadows where people like him belong.

He can't even lift his eyes to heaven. Head down. Shoulders slumped. And he beats his chest—an outward sign of inward anguish—as he prays the only prayer he has left:

"But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.'" — Luke 18:13 (NLT)

No resume. No comparisons. No religious credentials. Just raw, desperate honesty: I'm a sinner. Have mercy.

Jesus' verdict? The tax collector—the desperate one, the honest one, the one who brought nothing but need—went home justified. The Pharisee didn't.

Historical Prayers from the Swamp

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) spent years wrestling with his own brokenness—sexual addiction, intellectual pride, spiritual confusion. Even after his conversion, he looked at the wreckage of his inner life and knew he couldn't fix it himself. So he prayed with brutal honesty:

"The house of my soul is too narrow for you to come to it. May it be enlarged by you. It is in ruins: restore it."

This is the prayer of someone who's stopped pretending the house is in good shape. Someone who's looked at the ruins and said: I can't fix this. But maybe You can.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) battled depression so severe he sometimes couldn't get out of bed. The spiritual anguish was crushing—doubts, despair, a sense of God's absence. In one of his darkest moments, he wrote this prayer:

"I am dust and ashes and full of sin... I have no other refuge or comfort than your dear Son Jesus Christ."

Not theological precision. Not spiritual victory. Just desperate clinging to the only hope he had left: Jesus.

These weren't prayers from mountaintops. They were prayers from swamps, prisons, depressions, doubts, and desperation. Prayers that brought the real mess, the actual ruins, the honest brokenness before God.

And every single one was heard.

The Wayfarer Moment

Prayer isn't about having the right words. It's about bringing our real selves—broken, desperate, honest—to whatever we call Real.

For so long, I thought I had to pray the "right" way. Thought the universe was listening for spiritual maturity, unwavering faith, positive thinking. So I prayed prayers I thought were acceptable, not prayers that expressed what I actually felt.

Those prayers bounced off the ceiling.

But when I finally stopped performing and started being real—when I prayed the ugly prayers, the doubting prayers, the angry prayers, the desperate prayers—something shifted.

Not because God suddenly started listening. He had been listening all along. But because I finally started being honest.

And honesty is the language of connection.

"We must lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us." — C.S. Lewis, Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer

Reality doesn't need our pretense. It already knows the truth. What it wants is for us to know it—and to speak it.

The swamp teaches us to reach out without pretense. To cry out without composing. To pour out our souls without editing.

And when we do, we discover something astonishing: this is the conversation that's been waiting all along.

Not the polished one. The real one.

Song Integration

"But Then I Prayed" captures the theological truth at the heart of this chapter: prayer is not religious performance but radical vulnerability before God. The phrase "but then" functions as the hinge between two realities—our powerlessness and God's presence. This is not a magical formula but a relational turning point, the moment when we stop bearing our burdens alone and invite Presence into our panic.

The chapter teaches that honest prayer trumps perfect prayer, and this song embodies what that honesty sounds like. The opening verse names the spiritual warfare of the swamp: *"The night was long, the weight was strong, the shadows whispered, 'You don't belong.'"* These whispers aren't merely self-doubt but the voice of the accuser. To name this darkness in prayer is to drag it into the light where its power diminishes. Like Psalm 22's "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"—this is honest anguish without apology.

The pre-chorus reveals the scandal of grace: *"And in my sorrow, in my despair, I found Your presence waiting there."* God doesn't wait for us to clean up before drawing near. Psalm 34:18 promises He is "close to the brokenhearted," which means we find God's presence not despite our despair but within it. Love meets us in the muck, not after we've escaped it.

The chorus testifies to how presence changes the equation: *"But then I prayed, and You were near, Your voice of love cast out my fear."* This doesn't claim circumstances changed instantly, but that experience

shifted radically. "Your voice of love cast out my fear" echoes 1 John 4:18—perfect love driving out fear. This is encounter with the living God, not self-talk. When we experience God's love as personal reality, fear loses its tyranny. We're still in the swamp, but we're not alone in it.

"Your mercy came, Your grace remained" captures both the immediate and the ongoing. Mercy comes in crisis moments; grace remains through the long haul. The "chains were gone—You healed my pain" speaks to spiritual and relational healing—the chains of isolation, shame, and pretense breaking. The pain of bearing burdens alone being lifted. This healing is profound even when outer circumstances remain difficult.

The song follows the biblical lament pattern: honest complaint, desperate plea, wrestling, and eventual surrender. But it's not linear—it's the messy, cyclical reality of faith under pressure. The willingness to ask "why?" without rushing to easy answers models what the chapter teaches: God can handle our questions. He prefers honest wrestling to polished performance.

The repeated refrain "But then I prayed" creates a spiritual practice, training our hearts to run to God in crisis as our first response, not our last resort. Each verse presents a new challenge; each time the response is the same: turn toward God. The song ends with commitment to ongoing relationship: "So I will pray through every fight, I'll lift my song in darkest night." This is the realism of mature faith—the swamp may not disappear immediately, but the pattern is established. When darkness comes, we turn toward Light.

This song serves transformation because it demonstrates the prayer the chapter describes: groaning, crying out, questioning honestly—all while maintaining the thread of faith. Not faith that circumstances will change according to our preferences, but faith that God is present, listening, love itself. This is the prayer that changes everything—not because it manipulates God but because it positions us where transformation happens: in the presence, in the honesty, in the

relationship that was always available.

Lyrics: But Then I Prayed

[Verse 1]

The night was long, the weight was strong,
The shadows whispered, "You don't belong."
I felt the fear, the dark surround,
No light, no hope, no solid ground.

[Pre-Chorus]

And in my sorrow, in my despair,
I found Your presence waiting there.

[Chorus]

But then I prayed, and You were near,
Your voice of love cast out my fear.
Your mercy came, Your grace remained,
The chains were gone—You healed my pain.
But then I prayed, but then I prayed.

[Verse 2]

The storms rolled in, the waves were high,
The questions burned, "Lord, why, oh why?"
My strength was gone, my faith ran dry,
Yet still I lifted up my cry.

[Pre-Chorus]

And in the chaos, I heard You say,
"My child, I'm here, don't turn away."

[Chorus]

But then I prayed, and You were near,
Your voice of love cast out my fear.
Your mercy came, Your grace remained,
The chains were gone—You healed my pain.
But then I prayed, but then I prayed.

[Bridge]

Mountains move, and waters part,
Your power reaches every heart.
When all seems lost, when hope is faint,
Your name alone sustains the saints.
I called to You, and You replied,
Your love restored my life inside.

[Chorus]

But then I prayed, and You were near,
Your voice of love cast out my fear.
Your mercy came, Your grace remained,
The chains were gone—You healed my pain.

But then I prayed, but then I prayed.

[Outro]

So I will pray through every fight,

I'll lift my song in darkest night.

Key Takeaways

- **Honest prayer trumps perfect prayer.** God doesn't need your eloquence—He wants your reality. Raw, messy, doubting prayers connect more deeply than polished performances.
- **Lament is a legitimate form of prayer.** Bringing your pain, anger, and confusion directly before God without sugarcoating is biblical faith, not lack of faith.
- **Prayer is surrender, not strategy.** Stop trying to manipulate outcomes and start yielding to a larger reality. "Not my will, but Yours" is the prayer that changes everything.
- **Presence changes the equation.** When you cry out, you discover you're not alone in the swamp. God doesn't always remove the trial immediately, but He never leaves you to face it alone.

Reflections for the Road

Questions for the Journey:

1. When do you typically turn to prayer—first or last?

Be honest. Do you reach out when life is smooth, or only when you've exhausted every other option?

What would it look like to make honest conversation your first response instead of your last resort?

2. What does your "prayer voice" sound like?

Is it formal? Polished? Theological? Or is it raw, honest, unfiltered?

What would change if you prayed like you talk to your closest friend—without editing, without performing, without pretending?

3. Read Psalm 13 or Psalm 22 slowly.

Notice how the psalmist starts with raw complaint—"How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?"—and moves toward trust. Lament doesn't have to end in despair; it can end in surrender.

Can you pray like this—starting with brutal honesty and ending with trust, even when your circumstances haven't changed?

4. What would you lose if you stopped performing "acceptable" prayers?

What part of your prayer life is for God, and what part is maintaining an image—for yourself or others?

5. How will you practice honest prayer this week?

Name one specific thing you'll stop editing out. One fear you'll name. One doubt you'll confess. One desperate need you'll actually admit.

When will you pray this way? Where? Make it specific.

Practice: The Unedited Prayer

Set aside 10 minutes. Find a quiet place. Bring a journal or open a blank document.

Write a prayer without editing. Don't worry about grammar, theology, or saying the "right" thing. Just pour out what's actually in you—fear, anger, doubt, grief, confusion, desperation, whatever.

Start with: "Here's the truth..."

And let it flow. Uncensored. Unedited. Unpolished.

When you're done, don't read it back. Don't judge it. Just offer it: "This is my prayer. It's real. It's messy. But it's mine."

That's the conversation that's been waiting.

Practice: Simple Prayer

Richard Foster calls it "Simple Prayer"—bringing your ordinary concerns to a loving presence without facade, without pretending to be holy, without concealing true feelings.

Here's how to practice it this week:

Daily (5-10 minutes):

Each morning or evening, sit in a quiet place. No special posture required. No religious language necessary. Just you and honesty.

Say out loud (or write down) these three things:

1. **"This is where I am..."** - Name your actual state. Not where you should be. Where you ARE.

- *"I'm exhausted."*
- *"I'm angry at You."*
- *"I don't know if I believe anymore."*
- *"I'm terrified about [specific thing]."*
- *"I feel nothing."*

2. **"This is what I need..."** - Ask honestly. No spiritualizing. What do you actually need?

- *"I need this situation to change."*
- *"I need to feel something besides numb."*
- *"I need help with my daughter."*
- *"I need to know You're real."*
- *"I need rest."*

3. **"I'm willing to..."** - What are you willing to do? Even if it's small.

- *"I'm willing to show up tomorrow and try again."*
- *"I'm willing to be honest instead of hiding."*
- *"I'm willing to ask for help."*
- *"I'm willing to keep talking to You even though I'm angry."*
- *"I'm willing to trust You with this one thing."*

That's it. No closing formula required. No "amen" if it doesn't feel right. Just honest conversation.

This Week:

Try this practice for 7 days. Keep it simple. Keep it honest. Don't perform. Don't pretend.

At the end of the week, notice:

- Did anything shift?
- Did honesty feel different from religious performance?
- Did you sense anything—even faintly—listening?

Remember: You're not trying to pray "correctly." You're learning to bring your real self instead of your edited self. That's swamp prayer. And it's the kind that gets heard.

Closing Image

You're still in the swamp. Water still dark. Way out still unclear. But you've cried out. And discovered something profound: you're not alone.

Presence is here. In the muck. In the mess. Mid-desperation.

It's not waiting for you to clean up before it comes close. It's close to the brokenhearted. It saves the crushed in spirit.

You expected thunder. You expected lightning. You expected a dramatic rescue with angels and trumpets and immediate deliverance.

Instead, you got this: a quiet knowing. A gentle pressure on your shoulder. A whisper in the chaos that says, *"I see you. I'm here."*

Not what you asked for. But somehow—impossibly—exactly what you needed.

Take a breath.

You're still stuck. Still covered in muck. Still can't see the way out.

But you're not alone anymore. And that changes the mathematics of the swamp.

Before, it was: you versus the muck, you versus the darkness, you versus the despair. A losing battle. An impossible fight.

Now it's different. Now there's Presence. Now there's Someone in the swamp with you. Not pulling you out yet. Not fixing it yet. Just... there. Steady. Holding. Present.

So you whisper it again, this time not with resignation but surrender: "Help me."

And the help is already there. Not in the form you expected. Not on your timeline. But present. Real. Holding you even as you sink.

Because that's what love does. Doesn't wait for us to get it together. Meets us in the falling apart.

You're still in the swamp.

But now you're not alone in it.

And somehow—impossibly—that changes everything.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 3)

MOVEMENT 1: IN THE SWAMP (The Struggle)

Chapter 3: STOP!! And Make a Decision

*"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.
Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." —
Deuteronomy 30:19*

STOP!! And Make a Decision

Listen at: <http://go.skylerthomas.com/8vYOR0>



Scan to listen: STOP!! And Make a Decision

An Invitation to Consider

You've named the swamp. You've considered that God might be calling.

Maybe you even whispered that prayer: *"Yes, God. I want to listen."*

But now comes the harder part. The decision part.

What if I told you that even your doubt can be part of the prayer? What if you could say to God:

"God, I'm not sure I believe all this. Help me with my unbelief. I'm ready to start listening to Your advice for my life. I want to leave this swamp, but I don't know how. Help me. I'm opening myself up to making a decision to continue this journey of discovery."

That's enough. That's honest. That's real.

You don't have to have it all figured out. You don't have to believe everything perfectly. You just have to be willing to take the next step.

To pray—even if it's just "Help."

To listen—even if you're not sure you'll hear anything.

To decide—to continue this journey of discovery, wherever it leads.

Can you accept the possibility that God can help you even in your unbelief? That He can lead you out of the swamp even when you're not sure He's real?

Because here's the truth: He doesn't need your certainty. He just needs your willingness to take one step.

Keep reading. And be ready to decide.

You've cried out for help. Now what?

Let me tell you what I wish someone had told me years earlier:

You can't heal what you won't name. You can't leave where you won't admit you're stuck. And you can't change direction until you first stop

moving in the wrong one.

You've spent long enough analyzing the swamp. Understanding how you got there. Processing the pain. Talking about it with your therapist, your support group, your journal. And all of that has value—real value. Self-awareness is important.

But at some point, awareness has to lead to action. Understanding has to become decision. Knowledge has to translate into movement.

Because here's the uncomfortable truth: you can know everything about your swamp—its depth, its toxicity, how you ended up there, why you've stayed—and still die in it. Knowledge alone doesn't save you. Decision does.

This chapter breaks the pattern of the previous ones. It's urgent. Confrontational. The song is written in rap/spoken word because sometimes truth needs to interrupt, not soothe. Sometimes love sounds like "STOP!" not "it's okay."

If you've recognized your swamp (Chapter 1) and you've learned to speak honestly in it (Chapter 2), there's only one question left: What are you going to do about it?

Not tomorrow. Not when you feel ready. Not when you have all the answers figured out.

Now.

The writing that follows came from the moment my secrets were exposed and the people who loved me most said, "We're not going to watch you die. You have to choose... or we walk." It's about the crossroads we all reach eventually—the moment when staying put is no longer an option, and forward is the only way through.

You're at that crossroads now. And you have to choose.

Choose. This day. How you will live.

Why now? Why can't you take your time, think it through, weigh all the options?

Because every day you don't choose healing, you're choosing something else:

- Choosing the swamp (familiar misery)
- Choosing control (exhausting illusion)
- Choosing performance (soul-crushing work)
- Choosing to stay stuck (slow death)

Not deciding feels like neutrality, but it isn't. It's still a decision—for the status quo. It's a decision to keep drowning.

Key Themes

1. The Paralysis of Neutrality

We tell ourselves not deciding is safe middle ground. We can wait. Observe. Keep our options open.

C.S. Lewis dismantles the illusion:

"Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important." — C.S. Lewis, God in the Dock

Lewis forces the issue: you can't stay neutral about what matters most. Either Truth (with a capital T) is real, or it isn't. Either you choose toward it, or you choose away from it.

Middle ground doesn't exist.

Same with the swamp. You can't stay indefinitely between drowning and swimming. Every day you don't choose to leave is a day you've chosen to stay.

Neutrality is a myth. Just another word for "status quo."

Even Dante recognized this in his *Inferno*:

"These wretches, who were never truly alive... are mixed with that cowardly crew of angels... Heaven drove them out to keep its beauty from being marred; and the depths of Hell will not receive them." — Dante Alighieri, Inferno, Canto III

The uncommitted, those who refused to choose, were rejected by both heaven and hell. They belonged nowhere because they stood for nothing.

Not deciding is still deciding. The question is: what are you deciding for?

God doesn't want your indecision. Your hedging. Your "let me think about it."

He wants you. All of you. Now.

Not because He's demanding. Because He's desperate for you to live.

2. The Cost of Comfort

Dallas Willard exposes why we resist decision-making:

"The cautious faith that never saws off the limb on which it is sitting never learns that unattached limbs may find strange, unaccountable ways of not falling... The issue is not really one of risk. It is the issue of to whom we will risk ourselves... The greatest challenge you and I face today is not whether we can believe, but whether we can trust. Trust requires action. It requires that we stop merely wishing and start walking." — Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy

Willard names our fear: we're not scared of making the wrong choice. We're scared of making any choice that requires letting go of control. We'd rather sit on the limb than saw it off and discover we'll be caught.

The swamp feels safer than the water because it's familiar. We know this pain. We've adapted to this misery. Leaving means risking the unknown—and that terrifies us more than slow death.

But Willard says: trust requires action. You can't trust theoretically. You have to actually step. Move. Choose.

Only in the choosing do you discover that reality "can be counted on."

The cost of comfort reveals why we resist making decisions in the first place. But when we finally do decide, we discover something profound: the decision itself is an act of faith.

3. Decision as Act of Faith

Brennan Manning reframes decision-making as fundamentally spiritual:

"My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it." — Brennan Manning, The Ragamuffin Gospel

Define yourself radically as one beloved. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion.

When we stop pretending and start living as beloved, we make choices from a different foundation. We no longer choose based on fear of rejection or need for approval. We choose based on who we already are: loved, accepted, enough.

The decision to trust—to step out of the swamp and toward the water—is the ultimate act of faith. It says, 'I believe I'm loved. I believe something good wants good for me. I believe there's a better way.'

Manning shifts the question from "What should I do?" to "Who am I?"

If your identity is "beloved," the decision becomes natural. You choose healing not because you've earned it, but because you're already worthy of it. You step toward the water not to prove yourself,

but because you trust what's calling you.

The swamp keeps you stuck in the old identity: performer, failure, impostor.

The decision to leave is the decision to accept your true identity: beloved.

What if you're already loved, already enough, already worthy—right now, in the swamp?

When we make the decision to trust—to step toward the water—we discover that the real transformation isn't about acquiring something new. It's about releasing what we've been clinging to.

4. The Freedom of Letting Go

Richard Rohr, in *Falling Upward*, describes what happens when we finally choose surrender:

"True transformation happens not by acquiring something new, but by letting go of something old. The first half of life is about building the container; the second half is about filling it with actual contents—or, more commonly, emptying ourselves of the false contents." — Richard Rohr, Falling Upward

Your greatest spiritual teachers are your failures. They break open the containers you spent the first half of life building. And in that brokenness, you discover what you actually need isn't more success, more control, more certainty—it's the freedom to be loved as you are.

The decision to stop, to make a choice, is often the decision to let go. Not to acquire. Not to achieve. But to release your grip on the swamp and trust that the water will hold you.

Transformation happens through subtraction, not addition. You don't need more willpower. More strategy. More options.

You need to let go.

The decision this chapter proposes isn't "work harder." It's "release your grip."

Stop clinging to the swamp. Stop protecting yourself. Stop maintaining the false self.

Let go—and discover what you've been afraid of losing was never yours to keep.

5. The Two Paths

The road turns into a "Y" here. And you must choose.

This isn't a decision you can make gradually. You can't ease into it. You can't half-commit and see how it feels. The swamp or the water's edge. Staying or leaving. The false self or the real.

You're standing at the fork, and paralysis is just a slow yes to the swamp.

An ancient story captures this choice perfectly:

The Crossroads

"Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster... Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live!" — Deuteronomy 30:15, 19 (NLT)

Choose life. Not because it's easy. Because it's real.

The choice isn't complicated. It's just hard.

Forward or back. Life or death. Water or swamp.

The only question is: will you move?

Stories of Decision

Throughout history, the crossroads moment has defined destinies. Not the gradual drift, but the crisis decision—the moment someone stopped, turned, and chose a different path.

Moses at the Burning Bush (Exodus 3-4)

Moses had been running for 40 years. Hiding in the wilderness. Tending sheep. Trying to forget who he was and what he'd done. The swamp of shame and exile had become comfortable—or at least familiar.

Then came the burning bush. The voice calling his name. The impossible assignment: "Go back. Confront Pharaoh. Lead my people out."

Moses argued. Made excuses. Tried every angle to avoid the decision:

- "Who am I to do this?"
- "What if they don't believe me?"
- "I'm not eloquent enough."
- "Please send someone else."

But finally, he made the choice. Not because he felt ready. Not because he had it all figured out. He chose because the burning bush wouldn't let him stay in the wilderness.

He turned from the swamp of hiding toward the terrifying path of calling.

The Prodigal Son's Turning Point (Luke 15:17-20)

"When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you."'" — Luke 15:17-18 (NLT)

Three decisive phrases:

1. **"When he finally came to his senses"** - Reality broke through. The illusion shattered. He saw the swamp for what it was.
2. **"I will go home to my father"** - Not "I should." Not "someday I might." I WILL GO.
3. **"So he returned home to his father"** - The decision became action. He didn't wait until he felt worthy or had the perfect speech. He moved.

The turning point wasn't gradual awakening. It was a crisis moment in a pigpen when starvation and desperation finally overpowered pride and shame.

Peter's Denial and Restoration (John 21:15-17)

After betraying Jesus three times, Peter went back to fishing. Back to the old life. The swamp of failure and shame.

Then Jesus showed up on the beach. Asked Peter three times: "Do you love me?"

Each time, Peter had to choose: Will I defend myself? Will I run? Or will I answer honestly?

*"Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."
Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep." — John 21:17 (NLT)*

That vulnerable admission—"You know everything about me, including my failure, and I still love you"—was the crossroads. Peter chose honesty over hiding. Restoration over resignation. Forward over back.

Jesus' response: "Feed my sheep." Not "Earn your way back." Not "Prove yourself first." Just: You've chosen truth. Now live your calling.

The Rich Young Ruler's Missed Crossroads (Mark 10:17-22)

Not every story ends with the right choice.

A wealthy young man ran up to Jesus, desperate: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus gave him the path forward: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

"At this the man's face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions." — Mark 10:22 (NLT)

He stood at the crossroads. He saw the choice clearly. But he couldn't let go of the swamp—his wealth, his security, his identity—even though it was killing him spiritually.

He walked away sad. Not because he didn't know the answer. Because he knew it and still chose the swamp.

This is the tragedy: You can see the path and still refuse to walk it.

Martin Luther's Crisis Decision (1517)

Martin Luther, a Catholic monk and professor, was drowning in religious performance. Trying to earn salvation through endless confession, self-punishment, spiritual disciplines. The swamp of "never enough."

Then he rediscovered grace in scripture: "The righteous will live by faith" (Romans 1:17).

On October 31, 1517, he nailed 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg—challenging the entire religious system he'd devoted his life to.

When summoned to recant before the Diet of Worms, he faced the ultimate crossroads: Safety or truth? The approval of the church or the freedom of conscience?

His answer: "Here I stand. I can do no other."

That decision cost him everything—security, reputation, even his life was threatened. But it sparked a Reformation that changed the world.

Because one man stopped, looked at the crossroads, and chose truth over comfort.

Corrie ten Boom's Wartime Choice (1940s)

Corrie ten Boom and her family were comfortable watchmakers in Holland. When the Nazis invaded, they faced a choice: Stay safe and silent, or risk everything to hide Jews.

They chose to act. Transformed their home into a hiding place. Saved an estimated 800 lives.

Eventually they were betrayed, arrested, sent to concentration camps. Corrie's father died after 10 days. Her sister Betsie died at Ravensbrück.

But before she died, Betsie told Corrie:

"We must tell people what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still." — Betsie ten Boom, The Hiding Place

After the war, Corrie could have chosen bitterness. Hiding. Safety. But she chose to travel the world sharing forgiveness—even forgiving a guard from Ravensbrück who approached her after a speaking event.

The crossroads didn't end with her wartime decision. Every day after, she had to choose again: bitterness or forgiveness, hiding or witness, safety or mission.

The Pattern of Decision

Notice what these stories have in common:

1. **Crisis precipitates clarity** - The burning bush. The pigpen. The beach confrontation. The church door. The Nazi invasion. Crisis forces the decision.

2. **The choice is binary** - There's no middle ground. Moses couldn't half-confront Pharaoh. Peter couldn't partially confess his love. Luther couldn't somewhat stand. The decision is all or nothing.

3. **Fear doesn't disqualify you** - Every person was terrified. Moses argued. The prodigal rehearsed his speech. Peter knew his own failure. Luther faced death threats. Fear is normal. Paralysis is optional.

4. **The decision precedes the feeling** - No one felt ready. No one waited for courage. They chose, then moved, then the courage followed.

5. **Inaction is a choice** - The rich young ruler didn't make a "wrong" choice. He made no choice—which was choosing the swamp by default.

You're standing at your own crossroads. The pattern is the same. The question is the same.

Will you move?

The Wayfarer Moment

The decision to leave the swamp is terrifying—not because you don't know what to do, but because you do.

For me, the hardest part wasn't figuring out the right choice. It was admitting I'd been making the wrong one.

For years.

The swamp wasn't happening to me. I was choosing it. Every day I stayed, I chose it again.

That's the brutal honesty this chapter ponders: you're not a victim of the swamp. You're its tenant. And eviction requires your signature.

Viktor Frankl, who survived Auschwitz, wrote:

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." — Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning

That space—that moment between the swamp and the decision—that's where freedom lives.

You can't control what happened to you. Can't control the circumstances that led to the swamp. Can't control other people's choices that contributed to your pain.

But you can control what you do next.

That's your power. That's your freedom.

And no one—not your past, not your circumstances, not your fears—can take that from you.

Song Integration

The rap "STOP!! And Make a Decision" breaks the contemplative rhythm with prophetic urgency. This is not gentle invitation but loving confrontation—the voice of truth refusing to let us languish in analysis paralysis. The chapter teaches that neutrality is myth, and the song embodies that truth through aggressive tempo and relentless call to action. This is what love sounds like when it will not watch us die slowly in the comfort of indecision.

The opening command—"STOP!!"—is fierce mercy, echoing the prophetic tradition where God interrupts patterns leading to destruction: Nathan confronting David, Jesus overturning temple tables. Sometimes love must disrupt, must jolt us from comfortable

numbness, must create crisis so decision becomes possible. This interruption represents Bonhoeffer's "costly grace"—grace demanding everything, calling us to die to self and actually move. The song's aggressive format creates holy discomfort propelling us toward the crossroads where we must finally choose.

The rapid-fire delivery mirrors spiritual crisis urgency. When you're standing in traffic with a truck bearing down, you need someone to shout "MOVE!" The song is that shout, breaking through rationalizations: staying here is death, movement is life, and the choice cannot be delayed.

The opening verse names the internal chaos preceding decision—voices screaming, confusion about identity. This is the swamp of the mind where fear, shame, and doubt compete for control. The theological truth is profound: we cannot think our way out of this chaos. More analysis only adds more voices. Only decision—actual movement toward God, toward life—silences the cacophony.

When the song shifts to "Your voice breaks through with a crystal vision," we encounter divine intervention. This is not gentle whisper but clear command. God's voice cuts through noise with singular clarity: the time for deliberation is over. "The fear fades out, now I see You're near" represents what happens when we stop internal arguments and hear the one Voice that matters. The chapter teaches through Deuteronomy 30:19, "Choose life," and the song makes that choice immediate and personal. God's voice doesn't add to confusion; it cuts through it with binary clarity: life or death, swamp or water, paralysis or movement.

"All I gotta do is turn and let You steer" encapsulates the chapter's core tension. The decision is both simple and impossibly difficult. Simple: just turn. Difficult: turning means releasing everything we've clung to for security and control. What needs to change is not God's posture toward us but our posture toward God. This isn't heroic achievement but humble surrender—not proving worthiness but accepting we're already beloved.

The progression from chaos to clarity to commitment mirrors the spiritual journey. James 2:17 teaches "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." The song embodies this—decision is validated not by feeling differently but by moving differently. One step toward the voice calling us to life is the faith that saves.

The bridge declares: "Grace, grace, it's greater than sin, it pulls me out of my darkest place." This theological foundation is critical. We can risk the decision because grace catches us. We can release control because grace holds us. We can step into the unknown because grace is already there. The chapter teaches through Richard Rohr that transformation happens through subtraction—letting go, not grasping harder. The song declares what makes letting go possible: grace greater than our sin.

The choice of rap as musical form is theologically intentional. Rap doesn't allow passivity. It demands engagement, creates urgency, confronts rather than soothes. The aggressive rhythm and demanding repetition shake us from contemplative analysis and thrust us toward the crossroads.

This is the song for everyone who knows what they need to do but hasn't done it. For everyone at the crossroads, paralyzed by fear. The song is the voice of love shouting with holy urgency: "STOP!! And make a decision. Now. Today. Choose life."

Lyrics: Stop/Decide (The Rap)

(Intro)

Yo, I'm trapped in the noise, I'm lost in my mind,

Skeletons creeping, they're crossing the line.

Doubts keep spinning, I'm running in place,

But I hear Your voice calling, cutting through the haze.

(Verse 1)

I can't fake it, no, I can't shake it,
The pain in my chest, I just can't take it.
Voices screaming, got me stuck in my head,
Skeletons dancing where the angels once tread.
What's sleek? What's weak? Who's real? Who's fake?
I'm drowning in the questions I can't seem to shake.
I'm shouting to the sky, "God, show me the way,
I'm tired of the chaos; I'm begging You today."

(Hook)

STOP! Gotta make a decision,
Your voice breaks through with a crystal vision.
The fear fades out, now I see You're near,
All I gotta do is turn and let You steer.

(Verse 2)

You said, "Lay it down, I'll carry the weight,
Let Me take your struggle, it's never too late."
Step by step, yeah, I'm walking the light,
The chains fall off as I step in the fight.
The lies I believed, now they crumble and fall,
Your love lifts me higher, breaking through it all.
I was lost in my shame, but You called my name,

Now I'm running toward You, never the same.

(Hook)

STOP! Gotta make a decision,

Your voice breaks through with a crystal vision.

The fear fades out, now I see You're near,

All I gotta do is turn and let You steer.

(Bridge)

Grace, grace, it's greater than sin,

It pulls me from the darkness I was living within.

Hell on Earth? That's the weight of my shame,

But Heaven is Your love, now I'm praising Your name.

You whispered to me, "Give me your pain,

I'll take what's broken and make you whole again."

Eternal peace, yeah, it's all that I need,

So I follow Your voice, let it take the lead.

(Chorus)

Grace, grace, God's grace,

Pulling me out of my darkest place.

Grace, grace, it's a holy embrace,

Now I'm running with Your love, set a brand-new pace.

(Outro)

So I STOP, and I make the decision,
To follow Your path, walk the perfect vision.
The shame is gone, my heart feels new,
I'm stepping in faith, God, I'm trusting in You.

Key Takeaways

- **Neutrality is a myth.** Not deciding is still deciding—for the status quo, for the swamp, for slow death. Every day you don't choose healing, you're choosing something else.
- **Decision precedes feeling.** You don't wait until you feel ready, brave, or certain. You decide first, then courage follows. Faith moves before feelings catch up.
- **The crossroads demands a response.** You can't stay at the fork forever. Forward or back. Life or death. Water or swamp. Choose this day how you will live.
- **Letting go is an act of faith.** Transformation requires releasing your grip on control, certainty, and the familiar—trusting that grace will catch you when you step off your dead-end road.

Reflections for the Road

Questions for the Journey:

1. What decision have you been avoiding?

You know what it is. You've been circling it, analyzing it, processing it.

Name it. Out loud if you can.

What are you actually afraid of?

2. What's the cost of staying in the swamp?

Not theoretically. Practically.

What is it costing you today? This week? This year?

Your health? Your relationships? Your peace? Your future?

Write it down. Look at it.

3. What would "choosing life" look like for you—today?

Not a five-year plan. Not a complete transformation.

Just today. Just one step.

What would moving toward healing look like right now?

4. What are you waiting for?

Seriously. What has to happen before you move?

More clarity? More time? More strength? More certainty?

What if those things only come after you move, not before?

Practice: The Line in the Sand

Find a quiet space. Grab a piece of paper.

Draw a line down the middle.

On the left side, write: **SWAMP**

On the right side, write: **WATER**

Under "Swamp," list what staying looks like. What you'll keep doing. What you'll keep feeling. Where you'll be in a year if nothing changes.

Under "Water," list what leaving looks like. What you'll have to risk. What you'll have to let go of. What might be possible if you trust.

Look at both columns.

Really look.

Now make a choice.

Circle one. Not the one that feels safest. Not the one that requires less. The one that's TRUE.

Then take one action—today—that moves you toward what you circled.

One action. Not ten. Just one.

Move.

Closing Image

A foot raised. A breath held. The moment before the step.

The swamp is behind you. Familiar. Known. Safe in its misery.

The water's edge is ahead. Unknown. Uncertain. Terrifying in its promise.

And you stand at the crossroads.

This is the moment where everything pivots. Not when you arrive at the destination. Not when the transformation is complete. Right here. In the choosing.

For a moment, everything is suspended. You could go back. You could change your mind. You could tell yourself "maybe later" or "not yet" or "I'm not ready."

The swamp whispers its temptations: *At least you know what to expect here. At least you've learned to survive. At least it's familiar.*

The water whispers its invitation: *There's cleansing here. There's life here. There's something more than survival.*

And you—you're caught between comfort and calling.

But you don't go back.

You take a breath. You feel your heart pounding. You acknowledge the fear—real fear, legitimate fear—and you choose anyway.

Take a breath.

And then: movement.

One foot forward. Then the other.

Not running. Not confident. Not sure this is the right choice. Just moving.

Toward the water.

You've chosen. And now you walk.

Each step is a decision. Each step is an act of trust. Each step says: *I believe there's something better than where I've been, even if I can't yet see where I'm going.*

The swamp is behind you. The water's edge is ahead.

And you—with trembling legs and racing heart and a courage you didn't know you possessed—you're a wayfarer now.

Not because you're fearless.

Because you moved anyway.

Move.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 4)

MOVEMENT 1: IN THE SWAMP (The Struggle)

Chapter 4: Dying Changes Everything

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

Dying Changes Everything

Listen at: <http://go.skylertthomas.com/7U8VKi>



Scan to listen: Dying Changes Everything

An Invitation to Consider

You've named the swamp. You've prayed—even if it was just "Help."
You've made a decision to keep walking this journey.

But here's what nobody tells you at the beginning: deciding to leave the swamp means something in you has to die.

Not physically. But the version of you that's been surviving in the muck. The coping mechanisms you've relied on. The false self you've performed being. The illusions about how life works.

Those have to go.

And that feels terrifying. It feels like loss. Like defeat. Like the end.

But what if it's not the end? What if it's the beginning?

This chapter is about death—but not the kind you need fear, though it might be difficult. It's about the death that leads to life. The kind of dying that makes space for something new to grow.

I'm not going to sugarcoat it: this part is hard. Really hard.

But I want you to know something before you read further: on the other side of this death is resurrection. On the other side of letting go is freedom. On the other side of the tomb is new life.

You don't have to understand it all right now. You just have to keep reading. Keep walking. Keep trusting that the path leads somewhere good.

Can you do that?

Before we go further, let's pray together. A simple prayer, but an honest one—for the journey that may come.

"God, I'm scared of what has to die in me. I'm scared of letting go. But I'm also tired of living the way I've been living. If there's new life on the other side of this death, I want it. Help me trust You through this. Help me let go of what needs to go. Help me believe that You're leading me somewhere good. I'm willing to keep walking, even when I don't understand. Amen."

Someone once said: "Almost dying changes little. Dying changes everything."

You can come close to the edge, peek over, and walk back unchanged. You can almost hit bottom and still cling to the old life. Almost-dying gives you a scare, maybe a wake-up call. But it doesn't transform you.

Dying does.

I'm not talking about biological death. I'm talking about the psychological, spiritual deaths we must undergo if we're going to truly live. The deaths that happen daily—to old patterns, false selves, broken ways of being.

Because here's what they don't tell you when you first commit to change: that initial decision wasn't the end of dying. It was the beginning.

Maybe you committed your life to God years ago—as a teenager, a young adult, or maybe you were even baptized as an infant. That baptism symbolized death, burial, and resurrection. That moment was real. That commitment mattered.

But I'm not talking about that decision right now.

I'm talking about the death that needs to happen today. The swamp you're in now has nothing to do with who you were when you first believed (if that situation fits you). That person was sincere. That person meant every word. But there's a reason you picked up this book now and are reading it.

Life happened. Pain accumulated. False selves formed to protect you. Old patterns crept back in. And the death that needs to happen now is different from the transformation you imagined back then. This is a new death—not of your initial faith (if that's you), but of everything that's grown up around it. Everything that's keeping you stuck.

There's a moment in every healing journey when you realize: something has to die.

Maybe it's a relationship that's turned toxic. Maybe it's a dream that's become an obsession. Maybe it's the version of yourself you've been clinging to—the capable one, the strong one, the one who has it all together. Maybe it's your understanding of reality—the tame, manageable version you created to feel safe.

Something has to die. And you know it.

Death feels like defeat. Failure. The end.

But what if death is the beginning?

The writing that follows came from my two deaths—once to my old self, once to my illusions about how life works. Both felt like endings. Both turned out to be grace.

Before resurrection, there must be a tomb.

Key Themes

1. Death as Transformation

Death in spiritual literature is rarely just biological cessation. It's transformation. Passage. Transition.

Here are the different kinds of death we experience:

- Death to the false self - the person we've performed being, not who we actually are
- Death to illusions - the stories we've told ourselves about how life should work
- Death to control - the grip we've held on outcomes, other people, our futures
- Death to the life we planned so we can live the life that's actually here

Dallas Willard says that transformation requires this kind of death:

"The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as 'Christians' will become disciples – students, apprentices, practitioners – of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence." — Dallas Willard, The Great Omission

The death of my performance, the good and the bad, felt like the death of myself. I'd poured everything into it—my identity, my worth, my purpose. When it crumbled under the weight of my own moral failure, I didn't know who I was. Would I lose my family? Would I lose my job? Would I lose my purpose?

My moral decay didn't just end a chapter of my life. It severed me from the community I'd grown so close to. The people who knew me, trusted me, looked to me—gone. Not because they abandoned me, but because my choices had consequences. Real, devastating, life-altering consequences. And greater, it threatened my marriage.

I remember the night I finally admitted it was over. The community I'd built. The reputation I'd cultivated. The leader I'd pretended to be.

All of it—dead.

But here's what I didn't understand then: God wasn't destroying me out of anger. Life was dismantling the false version of me I'd built. Killing the performer who wore my success like a costume. Killing my addiction to approval, to respect, to being seen as the "good" one.

The false self had to die so the true self could begin to live.

But what exactly has to die? What is it that transformation requires us to release? The answer is painful but freeing: the false self we've been performing has to go.

2. The Death of the False Self

The false self is the person you've been pretending to be. The mask you wear. The performance you give. The image you maintain. Richard Rohr contrasts the true self (the person you were created to be, your authentic essence) with the false self (the person you think you need to be to survive, to be loved, to matter).

The false self is who we think we are—our mental self-image and social agreement, which most people spend their whole lives living up to or down to. It is all a fictional creation. The true self is who we objectively are from the beginning, in the deepest pattern of our being.

Richard Rohr writes:

"There is nothing to prove and nothing to protect. I am who I am and it's enough." — Richard Rohr, Immortal Diamond

The false self is built on:

- What people expect
- What earns approval
- What feels safe
- What maintains control

The false self says:

- "If people knew the real me, they'd reject me"
- "I have to perform to be loved"
- "Vulnerability is weakness"
- "I am what I accomplish"

Thomas Merton understood this deeply:

"Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And

*to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy." —
Thomas Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation*

The death of the false self is terrifying because it feels like losing yourself.

But you're not losing yourself. You're losing the prison you've been living in.

| **The False Self** | **The True Self** |

|-----|-----|

| Performs for approval | Rests in acceptance |

| Fears exposure | Practices honesty |

| Hides weakness | Confesses need |

| Image-management | Authenticity |

| Exhausting | Life-giving |

3. Dying to Control, Certainty, Performance

Control is one of the hardest things to surrender. We want to manage outcomes. Predict futures. Protect ourselves from pain.

Certainty is another. We want answers, not mysteries. Clear paths, not ambiguity. Solid ground, not shifting sand.

Performance is how we try to earn what life offers freely: acceptance, love, belonging.

All three have to die.

Dying to Control:

The death of control feels like freefall.

But it's not. It's falling into the arms of what's been holding you all along—the reality that you were never actually in control, and that's okay.

The spiritual life can only be real when it is lived in the midst of the pains and joys of the here and now. All things—a glass of water, a walk in the woods, a chair, a table—are spiritual. To live a spiritual life means to fully claim our daily existence, right here in the freefall.

Dying to Certainty:

This is hard for many of us because we've been taught doubt is weakness.

But actually, clinging to certainty is the opposite of faith. Real trust requires living in the midst of mystery.

The death of false certainty opens space for a bigger, truer understanding of reality.

Dying to Performance:

You can't earn love. You can't perform your way to acceptance. Every effort to prove yourself is just another attempt at self-justification that exhausts your soul.

Brennan Manning exposed this trap:

"My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it." — Brennan Manning, The Ragamuffin Gospel

The impostor is the false self shaped by others' expectations. The death of the impostor is the beginning of life. We don't have to be smart, successful, or accomplished enough. We simply have to be real.

The death of performance means you stop. You rest. You receive. You let yourself be loved not because you're impressive, but because you're human.

Letting go of control, certainty, and performance creates space for something new. But there's a space between the death and the new life—a tomb we must enter before resurrection can come.

4. Why Resurrection Requires a Tomb

You can't be raised unless you've died. You can't experience transformation unless you've been in the darkness.

Between death and resurrection, there's a tomb. Dark. Silent. Seemingly final. And most of us are terrified of that in-between space.

We want instant transformation: decision one moment, new life the next. We want to skip the tomb. But there's no resurrection without burial.

C.S. Lewis understood this paradox of death and life:

"The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up your self, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in." — C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

This is the hardest part: living in the tomb. You've let the old self die. The false identity is gone. The illusions are shattered. The performance has stopped.

But the new self hasn't emerged yet. You're in the darkness, waiting. And you don't know how long the darkness will last.

Most of us experience transformation this way: We've experienced death—of dreams, relationships, certainties, selves—and we're waiting in the tomb. We know about resurrection theoretically, but we're living in the tomb emotionally.

The darkness is part of the journey. You can't skip it. You can't rush it. You have to go through it.

But here's the promise: the tomb is not the end. It never was. It's the passage between who you were and who you're becoming.

What version of yourself needs to die so your true self can emerge?

Stories of Death and Transformation

The Phoenix Process:

Elizabeth Lesser, in *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow*, calls this "the phoenix process"—the experience of going through fire and being transformed.

If you're in a spiritual crash, you have to decide whether to resist it or surrender to it. This is the holy ground of transformation—the dark, messy, terrifying part of the journey where you let the old you die so the new you can be born.

The spiritual crash. That's what the swamp is. That's what brought you to this chapter.

And Lesser says you have a choice: resist or surrender.

Resisting looks like staying busy, staying numb, staying in control. Pretending the crash isn't happening. White-knuckling your way through.

Surrendering looks like admitting: "I can't hold this together anymore. Something has to change. Something has to die."

The holy ground of transformation is dark. Messy. Terrifying.

But it's also where the new you is born.

Jesus in Gethsemane:

It's night. The Passover meal is finished. Jesus leads His disciples to an olive grove called Gethsemane—a familiar place, a place He's gone before to pray. But tonight is different. Tonight, the weight of what's coming presses down on Him with crushing force.

He takes Peter, James, and John a little farther into the garden. And then He tells them something He's never said before: "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death."

Not "I'm concerned about tomorrow." Not "This will be difficult." Soul-crushed. To the point of death.

He leaves them and goes a little farther—alone now—and falls face-down on the ground. In one of the most honest moments in all of spiritual literature, Jesus prays with brutal vulnerability:

"He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, 'My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.'" — Matthew 26:39 (NLT)

This is crucial: Jesus didn't want to die. He didn't spiritualize it. Didn't pretend it was noble or easy. He asked for another way—desperately, repeatedly. Luke says His sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground. The anguish was so intense it manifested physically.

"If it is possible... take this cup away."

He's begging for escape. For a different plan. For relief from what He knows is coming: betrayal, abandonment, torture, the cross. And beyond the physical suffering—the spiritual horror of bearing the full weight of humanity's sin, of being separated from the Father.

But then, in the midst of that crushing anguish: "Yet I want your will to be done, not mine."

That's the death that changes everything. Not the death on the cross—that comes later. This is the death in the garden. The death of His will. His preference. His desire to avoid pain. Surrendered to a larger reality, a deeper trust.

And because He died that death in the garden before He died the death on the cross, resurrection was possible.

Paul's Daily Death:

Paul, in his letters, talks about dying constantly.

"And as for me, why would I risk my life hour by hour? For I swear, dear brothers and sisters, that I face death daily. This is as certain as my pride in what Christ Jesus our Lord has done in you." — 1 Corinthians 15:31 (NLT)

Every day, a death to self. Every day, a surrender.

"My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." — Galatians 2:20 (NLT)

The old Paul is dead. Saul, the persecutor, is gone. A new creation lives.

"I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ." — Philippians 3:7-8 (NLT)

Paul had to die to:

- His reputation (from respected religious leader to rejected outcast)
- His certainties (all his theological training had to be reconsidered)
- His control (shipwrecked, beaten, imprisoned)
- His plans (wanted to go to Spain, ended up in Rome—in chains)

But every death brought resurrection. Every loss brought gain. Every tomb preceded new life.

Choosing Vulnerability:

Brené Brown speaks to what it means to truly be seen:

"We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection." — Brené Brown, The Gifts of Imperfection

This is another kind of death—the death of hiding. The death of presenting only our curated, acceptable selves. The death of the armor we've worn to keep people at a safe distance.

Dying to the false self means letting ourselves be deeply seen and known. Not just our strengths, but our vulnerabilities. Not just our successes, but our failures. Not just who we wish we were, but who we actually are.

This terrifies us. Because what if we're seen and rejected? What if we're known and found wanting?

But Brown reveals the truth: love grows from the offering of our vulnerable, powerful selves. The very thing we're afraid will cost us love is actually what cultivates it.

What if the very thing you're most afraid to look at is exactly what needs to die so you can truly live?

A Deeper Truth

All these stories—from Elizabeth Lesser to Jesus to Paul to Brené Brown—point to the same reality: transformation requires death. Not metaphorical "letting go" or positive thinking. Actual death of something that's been alive in you.

By now, you should be convinced that the God who created you has been calling you into a better way of living. That the voice you're hearing isn't just some made-up fantasy in your head.

You've named the swamp. You've prayed. Have you decided to keep taking the journey?

The question isn't whether you believe the spiritual language. The question is: **Are you ready to let the old version of you die so the real you can live?**

An ancient writer named Paul captured this in Galatians 2:20. Whether you take this literally or metaphorically, here's what it means for anyone in the swamp:

Unpack every phrase:

- **"My old self has been crucified with Christ"** - Something in you has already died. The old self, the false self, the ego-driven self—crucified.
- **"It is no longer I who live"** - The old you is no longer running the show. This isn't self-improvement. This is death and resurrection.
- **"But Christ lives in me"** - The resurrection. New life. Not self-generated. Christ-generated.

- **"So I live in this earthly body"** - Still human. Still here. Still embodied. But the source has changed.
- **"By trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"** - The foundation. Not your performance. Love itself. Radical sacrifice.

This kind of transformation isn't a once-for-all event that happens and never needs to happen again. The symbolic death in baptism, in therapy, in recovery, in spiritual awakening—all of these point to an ongoing reality we live out across our entire lives.

As we grow from childhood into adulthood, as we experience the complexities and harsh realities of life, we discover new layers of the false self that need to die. New illusions about reality that need to be shattered. New areas of control we must surrender.

The child who committed to change believed. The teenager questioned. The young adult faced new temptations. The adult confronted failure. The mature person learned to let go.

Each stage of life requires its own deaths, its own resurrections. We're not repeating the initial transformation—we're living into the fullness of what that transformation means, layer by layer, death by death, resurrection by resurrection.

The Wayfarer Moment

You can't be resurrected until you're willing to die. Transformation requires surrender of the self we've been protecting.

This is the scariest wayfarer moment yet. Because death feels like loss. Like failure. Like the end.

But the wayfarer learns: Death is passage. The tomb isn't the end; it's the womb of new life. What feels like dying is actually being born.

Richard Rohr describes this transformative death:

"We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking." — Richard Rohr, Falling Upward

The most courageous thing we will ever do is to bear humbly the mystery of our own reality. Your False Self is who you think you are. Your True Self is who you are in the deepest pattern of existence. The goal is to die before you die, so that when you finally do die, you've learned how to die. This dying isn't death, it's freedom.

I didn't want the old me to die. I liked him. He was successful. Respected. Put-together. Sure, he was exhausted and empty inside, but at least he looked good.

When reality started dismantling that version of me—taking away the platforms, the approval, the certainties—I fought. Hard. I was furious. I felt abandoned.

But slowly, painfully, I started to see: Life wasn't destroying me. It was liberating me. The old me was a prison. And love loved me too much to leave me there.

Song Integration

"Dying Changes Everything" confronts us with the most paradoxical truth in spiritual transformation: we must die to live, lose ourselves to find ourselves, descend into the tomb before experiencing resurrection. The chapter teaches that transformation requires actual death of the false self, and the song gives voice to this terrifying yet liberating reality.

The chorus—*"Almost dying changes nothing, dying changes everything"*—crystallizes the chapter's core teaching. This distinction is theologically crucial. Almost dying is flirtation with transformation without commitment. It's touching the edge of surrender but pulling

back, acknowledging what needs to die but refusing to let it actually expire. And as the song declares, this changes nothing. The chapter illustrates this through multiple frameworks: the death of the false self, the death of control, the death of performance-based identity. In each case, partial death is insufficient. The song's insistence on complete death echoes Paul's radical statement in Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live." Not "I'm working on dying." Not "I'm mostly dead." But "I no longer live." This is total death, and only this kind makes resurrection possible.

The opening verse—*"I'm sinking deep, the waters rising, lost inside this broken place"*—evokes baptismal theology. Romans 6:3-4 teaches that baptism represents being buried with Christ in death so we might rise with Him in new life. The waters that feel like drowning are actually the waters of transformation. They close over the old self completely, suffocating what was, creating space for what will be. "Drowning in my own disgrace" names the spiritual reality precipitating this death—not some abstract false self but the actual mess we've made, the patterns we've established, the shame we've accumulated. But the whisper—*"Child, you will be found"*—reveals this as mercy. God enters the waters with us, guides us through the death, promises discovery on the other side.

The theological tension is profound: we must go under completely (full immersion, total death) while trusting Love will not let us stay under (resurrection is promised). We want to keep one foot on solid ground, one part protected from dying. But the song insists: complete submersion or no transformation.

The chorus continues: *"I release the chains I'm clutching, now I rise on healing's wings."* This sequence matters theologically. Release precedes rising. We don't rise by our own power; we rise because we've finally stopped clutching the chains anchoring us to the swamp, to the false self. The chains we clutch are paradoxically both bondage and false security—familiar even as they kill us. The chapter teaches through Richard Rohr that transformation happens through subtraction, not addition. The song embodies this: "I release" is the

action required of us. "Now I rise" is what grace does in response. "Spirit lifts me from the waters, breath of heaven fills my lungs" invokes Genesis 2:7—new creation theology. We're not being resuscitated to our old life but breathed into existence as new creations.

Verse two—"*The veil is torn, the light is breaking*"—references Jesus' death when the temple veil tore (Matthew 27:51), symbolizing direct access to God's presence. In our death to self, the veil between false identity and true identity is torn. "Flames of mercy burn around me" connects to the refiner's fire from Malachi 3:2-3—not punishment but purification, burning away what is false while preserving what is true.

"No more running, no more hiding, I am free, I'm found again" speaks to the death of the impostor. The false self runs and hides, maintains performance, protects the image. But in complete death, this exhausting pattern finally ends. We stop running because there's nothing left to protect. We stop hiding because we've been fully seen and are still loved.

This song serves as Movement One's climax because it names the hardest truth: transformation requires death—actual death of who we thought we were, what we thought we needed, how we thought life worked. And on the other side of that death, in the tomb, in the Saturday waiting, resurrection begins. The song doesn't rush past the tomb but honors the complete submersion, the staying dead to what needs to stay dead. Yet it also refuses to leave us there. "Dying changes everything" because death is not the end—it's passage, transformation, the doorway to life we couldn't access any other way.

Song: "Dying Changes Everything"

Verse 1

I'm sinking deep, the waters rising

Lost inside this broken place

Breathing in the weight of silence

Drowning in my own disgrace
My eyes grow dim, my strength is failing
Shadows closing all around
But in the stillness I hear whispers
"Child, you will be found"

Pre-Chorus

Tick tock... time fades out
Love breaks through the doubt

Chorus

Almost dying changes nothing
Dying changes everything
I release the chains I'm clutching
Now I rise on healing's wings
Spirit lifts me from the waters
Breath of heaven fills my lungs
In surrender I discover
New life rising with the sun

Verse 2

The veil is torn, the light is breaking
A timeless moment has come
Flames of mercy burn around me

Pulling me toward wholeness' throne

Grace like lightning strikes my spirit

Love restores my heart again

No more running, no more hiding

I am free, I'm found again

Pre-Chorus

Tick tock... time fades out

Love breaks through the doubt

Chorus (Big)

Almost dying changes nothing

Dying changes everything

I release the chains I'm clutching

Now I rise on healing's wings

Spirit lifts me from the waters

Breath of heaven fills my lungs

In surrender I discover

New life rising with the sun

Bridge (Build)

I have crossed from death to life

You're the fire, You're the light

Nothing stands but love divine

Dying changes everything

(Repeat as needed, rising each time)

Verse 3

Now I stand, my chains are broken

Every shadow swept away

Hope is rising, truth has spoken

Night has turned to brighter day

I will sing of resurrection

Testify to what love's done

From the grave into its glory

All my battles now are won

Final Chorus / Tag

Almost dying changes nothing

Dying changes everything

I am living in this presence

Breathing heaven's holy breath

Outro (Soft, reflective)

Heartbeat slows.

Tick... tock... time is gone

Eternal life has just begun

Love, You're my only song

Dying changed it all

Key Takeaways

- **Almost dying changes nothing; dying changes everything.** Partial surrender keeps you in the swamp with a different view. Complete death to the false self is what resurrection requires.
- **The tomb is not the end—it's passage.** Saturday's darkness between death and resurrection is where trust is tested. You can't skip the waiting, but the waiting isn't wasted.
- **What dies stays dead.** Don't resuscitate old patterns, false identities, or survival mechanisms. Let what needs to die remain buried so new life can emerge.
- **You can't resurrect yourself.** Transformation isn't self-improvement—it's being made alive by God's power. Your job is to surrender; His job is to raise you.

Reflections for the Road

These aren't homework. They're invitations. Gentle questions to help you engage with the deaths you're facing—or avoiding.

Take as much time as you need. Saturday can't be rushed. But it also can't be avoided.

Questions for the Journey:

1. What in you needs to die? Name it specifically.

Not in general terms. Not "my issues" or "my brokenness." What specifically needs to die?

Maybe it's a relationship that's become toxic. Maybe it's a dream that's become an obsession. Maybe it's the version of yourself you've been clinging to—the capable one, the strong one, the one who has it all

together.

Maybe it's your need to be right. Your need to control. Your need to perform.

Name it. Write it down. Look at it. Acknowledge: This has to die.

2. What are you afraid of losing if it dies?

Be brutally honest. Death feels like loss because it is loss. What will you lose if this thing dies?

Approval? Security? Identity? The future you planned? The person you thought you were?

Name the fear. Don't minimize it. Don't spiritualize it. Just name it.

Then ask: Is what I'm afraid of losing actually life? Or is it just familiar death?

3. What's your Saturday? Where are you stuck between death and resurrection?

Maybe something has already died—a marriage, a career, a certainty, a self—and you're in the tomb. Between the death and whatever comes next.

Saturday is disorienting. You can't go back to Friday (that life is dead). You can't see Sunday yet (transformation is still hidden). You're just... waiting.

If you're in Saturday, name it. You're not stuck. You're in passage. The tomb is part of the journey.

4. What would it look like to live as someone who's already let the old self die?

Imagine for a moment: What if the false self is already gone? What if the performance, the control, the fear—what if it's already dead?

What would you let go of? What would you stop protecting? How would you live differently?

You're not trying to kill what's already dead. You're learning to stop resuscitating it.

5. What would resurrection look like for you?

Not going back to the old life. Not returning to what was. But being transformed into something new.

You can't orchestrate resurrection. You can't force it. But you can imagine it. You can hope for it.

What new life might be emerging from this death? What new self might be born from this tomb?

Practice: The Burial Ritual

Find a quiet place. Somewhere you can be honest. Somewhere you can grieve.

Bring something that represents what needs to die. Maybe:

- An old journal from a season you're releasing
- A symbol of a role you've outgrown
- A picture of a dream you're surrendering
- An object that represents the false self you've been performing

Hold it. Look at it. Acknowledge it.

Thank reality for it, even. For what it was. For what it taught you. For how it protected you when you needed protection.

Then say out loud:

"I'm letting this die. I'm releasing it. I'm surrendering it to what's Real."

Pause. Breathe. Let yourself feel the weight of it.

Then speak this burial prayer:

"I surrender this. I let it die. I trust reality to transform what's meant to live and to bury what's meant to stay dead. I trust that Saturday doesn't last forever. I trust that life is making all things new. Amen."

If possible, literally bury the object. Or put it away somewhere you won't see it—a box in the closet, a drawer you don't open. A physical act of release.

You've named the death. You've released it. Now you wait. In the tomb. On Saturday.

But you're not alone. And Sunday is coming.

Closing Image

The tomb. Silent. Dark. Waiting.

Saturday—the day between death and resurrection. The most honest place to be.

You've died. Or something in you has died. Or something needs to die and you're finally letting it.

And now you're here. In the dark. In the silence. In the waiting.

It doesn't feel like grace. It feels like loss. It feels like the end.

But here's what the tomb teaches: Death is not the end. It's passage.

There's a story of someone spending Saturday in the grave. Silent. Still. Hidden.

Those who loved him spent Saturday in despair, thinking it was over.
Thinking Friday's death was final.

They didn't know Sunday was coming. They couldn't see resurrection
from inside Saturday.

Neither can you.

But it's coming anyway.

The tomb is dark, but it's not empty. Love is there. In the silence. In
the waiting. In the dying.

And love is the force that raises the dead.

So you wait. You grieve. You trust.

This is not passivity. This is not giving up. This is the hardest work
there is—letting go of what you desperately wanted to keep, releasing
what you thought defined you, surrendering control over outcomes
you can't control anyway.

Take a breath.

You let what needs to die stay dead.

No resuscitation of the old self. No resurrection of the false identity.
No revival of the patterns that brought you to the swamp in the first
place.

Dead stays dead.

But death is not the last word.

And you keep your face turned toward Sunday—toward
transformation you can't yet see but believe is coming anyway.

Saturday is dark. Saturday is silent. Saturday is waiting.

But Saturday is not forever.

Because dying changes everything.

And Sunday always comes.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Movement 2)

MOVEMENT 2: AT THE WATER'S EDGE (The Turning)

"On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, 'Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, "Rivers of living water will flow from his heart."'" — John 7:37-38 (NLT)

A Moment to Consider

By now, you should see the tempo and pattern of the book. You've been introduced to scriptures and writings about the true character of God's love. You've walked through four chapters about naming the swamp, crying out for help, making a decision, and letting something die.

Maybe you've been nodding along, intellectually interested but still holding back.

Maybe you've prayed the prayers but kept one foot in the swamp, just in case this doesn't work out.

Maybe you're standing at this water's edge thinking, "This all sounds nice, but is it real? Is this God thing actually important to my life?"

Here's what I want to ask you:

Are you ready to at least acknowledge that the tugging of your soul toward something greater than yourself has merit?

Not asking you to have it all figured out. Not asking you to become religious (that's the last thing I would suggest). Not asking you to check all the theological boxes.

Just asking: Can you admit that maybe—just maybe—there's something real here? That the Voice you've been hearing isn't just wishful thinking? That the pull you feel toward Love, toward Truth, toward Something More might actually be worth following?

Because if you can't admit that yet, the rest of Movement 2 is going to feel like empty religious language.

But if you can take that one small step—acknowledging that this might be real, that God might actually love you, that grace might actually be for you—then what comes next will change everything.

You don't have to be certain. You just have to be willing.

Take a moment. Right now. Before you keep reading.

Can you say, even tentatively: "God, I'm willing to believe You might be real. I'm willing to consider that You love me. I'm willing to let You wash me, even if I don't fully understand how."

That's enough. That willingness opens the door.

You've left the swamp.

It wasn't easy. Maybe you're still looking back over your shoulder, wondering if you made the right choice. Your feet are heavy with swamp mud. Your clothes are soaked, clinging to you. You smell like the muck you just escaped.

But you're here. At the water's edge.

This is liminal space. The in-between. Not swamp anymore, but not healed yet either. Not drowning, but not dancing. Not death, but not resurrection. Not Friday, not Sunday.

This is Saturday. Tomb time. Transition.

The water's edge is where grace does its most subversive work.

You want to clean yourself up before you step into the water. You're embarrassed by the mud, the stench, the evidence of where you've been. Surely you need to get yourself together first, right?

Wrong.

Grace says: Come as you are. Mud and all. Shame and all. Questions and all.

The water isn't there to judge you. It's there to wash you.

But here's the hard part: You have to let yourself be washed. You have to get in the water. You have to let grace touch the wounds.

And that's terrifying.

Because what if you're too dirty? What if the water rejects you? What if grace has limits and you've exceeded them?

These chapters—5 through 8—are about discovering the answer to those fears. And the answer is always the same: Grace is deeper than your shame. Wider than your failure. Stronger than your sin. More persistent than your doubt.

Want to know what you'll discover at the water's edge?

You're going to encounter something—Someone—in new ways:

- Living Water that quenches thirst you didn't know how to name
- Shadow that covers and protects in the scorching wilderness
- Amazing grace that reaches those who don't deserve it
- An invitation to dig deeper, to go beneath the surface and find bedrock truth

There's an ancient story about a woman who came to a well at noon—the hottest time of day, when nobody else would be there. She was hiding from judgment, carrying shame from five failed marriages. And she met someone there who offered her "living water"—water that becomes a spring welling up to eternal life.

You're going to learn what she learned: being truly known and truly loved changes everything.

You're going to discover what ancient poets knew: that there's shelter, refuge, rest—a shadow of protection under whose wings we find safety.

You're going to learn what an old hymn declares: Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

You're going to learn what the deep places teach: that grace doesn't just wash the surface—it goes all the way down to bedrock.

These aren't abstract theological concepts. They're water on your parched tongue. Shade on your scorched skin. Arms that hold you when you collapse. Truth that sets you free.

The water's edge is where you stop running from what's Real and start running toward it.

Where you stop hiding and start being found.

Where you stop performing and start receiving.

This is the turning. The hinge of your story. The moment when the narrative shifts from "I can't" to "maybe I can be helped." From "I'm too far gone" to "grace reaches farther."

The Journey at the Water's Edge:

Chapter 5: Living Waters Edge - You stand at the edge of the water, filthy from the swamp, convinced you have to clean yourself up before you can approach. But grace invites you to come as you are. The water

doesn't recoil—it receives you. This is the scandalous truth: you don't clean yourself up to receive grace. You receive grace to be cleaned.

Living Waters Edge

Chapter 6: In the Shadow of Your Grace - In the desert of transition, you discover that grace isn't just rescue from the pit—it's shelter in the wilderness. The shadow doesn't remove the sun; it provides covering under it. You learn the difference between hiding FROM truth and hiding IN truth. And you discover that the shadow proves the light is real.

In the Shadow of Your Grace

Chapter 7: Amazing Grace I Did Receive - You stand at the water's edge covered in the consequences of your choices—the shame of trampling on grace, the grave of autonomy, the dead-end road of self-rule. And you hear the whisper: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." Not someone mostly good. A wretch. Grace is scandalous precisely because it's for those who don't deserve it. And when you step toward the water, you feel Love's hand lifting you from the grave.

Amazing Grace

Chapter 8: Dig a Little Deeper - The surface mud is washing away, but underneath is scar tissue—layers of protection, coping mechanisms, wounds you've been medicating for years. Real healing requires going deeper. Cutting through the scar tissue. Opening the wound so it can drain. Excavating through performance, shame, wounds, and false beliefs until you hit bedrock truth: You are loved. You are worthy. You are enough. And grace goes all the way down.

Dig a Little Deeper

So stand here. At the edge. Feel the coolness of the water lapping at your toes. Hear the invitation: Come. Drink. Be washed. Be healed. Be made new.

You don't have to have it all together. You don't have to understand it all. You just have to wade in.

The water's not going to hurt you. It's going to heal you.

One step at a time.

What would it mean to approach healing without pretense? To come as you are, not as you think you should be?

Grace is deeper than you know. Wider than you can measure. Stronger than your shame. More faithful than you've dared to hope.

At the water's edge, you're about to discover just how amazing grace really is.

Entering This Movement

Before you wade into these four chapters, pause here at the water's edge. Look at where you've been. Feel where you are. Prepare for what comes next.

Look back at the swamp.

You've come through Movement 1. That wasn't easy. You got honest. You named the swamp. You cried out. You made the decision. You let something die.

That took courage. Real courage. Not the kind that pretends to be strong, but the kind that admits weakness.

Don't minimize what you did. Don't rush past it. You stepped out of the swamp. That matters.

Look at where you are now.

You're at the edge of the water. Still carrying the mud from the swamp. Still smelling like the muck you just escaped. Still a little

shaky from the journey.

You're in liminal space. The in-between. Not swamp anymore, but not healed yet either.

This is uncomfortable. Liminal space always is. Because you're between identities—no longer who you were, not yet who you're becoming.

But this is also sacred space. Because this is where grace does its most transforming work.

What this movement requires:

Movement 1 required honesty. You had to stop pretending and get real about the swamp.

Movement 2 requires receptivity. You have to let yourself be washed, held, healed. You have to receive what you can't earn.

That's harder than it sounds.

Because everything in you wants to clean yourself up first. To prove you're worthy of grace. To do something to deserve the healing.

But grace doesn't work that way. Grace says: Come as you are. Receive what you can't earn. Let yourself be loved.

Can you do that?

Can you step into the water without trying to clean yourself up first?

Can you receive grace even though you don't deserve it?

Can you let yourself be known—really known, mud and all—and still believe you're loved?

That's the work of Movement 2.

The woman at the well knew this.

She came to draw water at noon—the hottest time of day, when nobody else would be there. She was hiding from judgment, carrying shame from five failed marriages.

And she met Someone there who offered "living water"—water that becomes a spring welling up to eternal life.

She tried to deflect. To change the subject. To avoid being fully known.

But He kept bringing her back to the truth: I see you. All of you. And I'm offering you living water anyway.

Being truly known and truly loved—that's what she discovered at the well.

That's what you're about to discover at the water's edge.

One question before you begin:

Are you willing to be known?

Not the version of yourself you present to the world. But the real you. The one who's been hiding in the swamp. The one who's afraid of being rejected. The one who's convinced there's not enough grace for them.

Are you willing to let grace see all of that? And trust that it's enough?

If you are—even tentatively, even uncertainly—then you're ready.

The water is here. The invitation is extended. Grace is waiting.

Wade in. One step at a time. The water's not going to hurt you. It's going to heal you.

When you're ready, turn to Chapter 5: Living Waters Edge.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 5)

MOVEMENT 2: AT THE WATER'S EDGE (The Turning)

Chapter 5: Living Waters Edge

"Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." — John 4:14

Living Waters Edge

Listen at: <http://go.skylertthomas.com/nXiDRV>



Scan to listen: Living Waters Edge

Have you ever stood at a threshold between your old life and something new? Not knowing if you're ready. Not sure you're worthy.

Covered in the evidence of where you've been, wondering if you're clean enough to step forward?

That's where this chapter lives. At the water's edge.

And here's what I want you to know: You don't have to clean up first. The water is what cleans you.

I know that might sound strange. Or too good to be true. Or like spiritual talk that doesn't apply to real life.

But stay with me. Because this chapter is about the moment when everything you've been carrying—the shame, the failure, the mud from the swamp—meets something that can actually wash it away.

Can you be open to that possibility? Even if you don't fully believe it yet?

A Prayer of Invitation

You've walked through four chapters. You've named the swamp. You've cried out for help. You've been confronted with the need to decide. You've learned that something has to die.

And now you're here. At the water's edge.

Maybe this is the moment. The moment when you stop spinning in circles and start walking straight. When you stop analyzing and start trusting. When you make the decision to let God in—not just to your thoughts, but to your soul.

If you're ready—even if you're scared, even if you're uncertain—you can pray this prayer right now. Out loud or in your heart. Perfectly worded or stumbling through. It doesn't matter. What matters is that you mean it.

"God, I need You. I can't do this on my own anymore. I've tried, and I'm exhausted. I'm stuck in this swamp, and I don't know the way out.

I believe You're real—or at least, I want to believe. Help me with my unbelief.

I'm sorry for the ways I've pushed You away, for trying to run my own life, for making a mess of things. I know I can't fix this by myself.

Jesus, I believe You came for people like me—broken, messy, stuck. I believe You died so I could be forgiven and live a new life. I accept that gift. I receive Your grace.

Come into my life. Come into my soul. Fill me with Your Spirit. Teach me to hear Your voice. Lead me out of this swamp and into the life You have for me.

I'm willing to follow, even when I don't understand. I'm willing to trust, even when I'm afraid. I'm choosing You—today, right now.

Thank You for not giving up on me. Thank You for meeting me here, in the mess. I'm Yours. Amen."

If you prayed that prayer—even tentatively, even with doubts still swirling—something real just happened. Not because the words were magic. But because God was listening. And when you opened the door, He stepped in.

You might not feel different right away. You might still feel stuck, still feel afraid. That's okay. This is the beginning, not the end. The decision has been made. Now comes the journey.

This chapter is about what happens when you step into the water. When you let grace wash over you. When you discover that the water doesn't recoil from your mud—it cleanses it.

Keep reading. You're about to get wet.

What Is Grace? (And Why Do You Need It?)

We've been using this word a lot. Grace. It sounds religious, doesn't it? Like something that belongs in stained-glass windows and hymns. Something abstract. Theological. Distant.

But grace isn't religious. Grace is real.

Let me tell you what grace actually is—not in church language, but in human language. In the language of the swamp and the water's edge.

Grace is the gift you can't earn.

Everything in our world operates on exchange. You work, you get paid. You perform, you get approval. You achieve, you get status. You give, you expect something back. That's the economy we know. The one we live in every day.

Grace breaks that economy completely. That's why I say "Grace is scandalous."

Grace says: "I'm giving you something you didn't earn, don't deserve, and can never pay back. And I'm giving it freely, fully, without strings attached."

It's the water at the edge of the swamp that doesn't ask, "Are you worthy?" It just invites: "Come and drink."

Grace is love without conditions—and that's the scandal.

Maybe you've spent your whole life trying to earn love. Be good enough. Smart enough. Successful enough. Attractive enough. Useful enough. And when you fall short—when you mess up, fail, disappoint—you brace yourself for rejection.

Grace doesn't work that way.

Grace looks at you covered in swamp mud—the worst of what you've done, the deepest shame you carry, the ugliest parts you try to hide—and says, "I love you. Right now. Exactly as you are. Not because of what you've done, but because of who you are. You're

mine. And nothing you do can change that."

It's not tolerance. It's not "I'll put up with you." It's not "I love you despite your flaws."

It's "I love you. Period. Full stop. The mess doesn't change it. The failure doesn't diminish it. The distance you've run doesn't decrease it."

Here's what makes grace so hard to accept: It's too good to be true. Everything in you wants to add conditions: "But I have to do something, right? I have to earn it somehow. I have to be good enough first."

No. That's not grace. That's exchange. That's performance.

Grace says: "Come. Drink. Be washed. Be healed. Be made new. Bring nothing but your thirst and your mess. That's enough."

The scandal of grace is that it's free. Completely free. You can't earn it, buy it, or deserve it. You can only receive it.

And that's terrifying. Because if you can't earn it, you can't control it. You have to trust the One offering it.

Grace is power that transforms, not just accepts.

Here's what makes grace different from just acceptance or tolerance: Grace doesn't leave you in the swamp. It doesn't just say, "You're okay as you are, so stay there."

Grace says, "Come as you are—and I'll make you new."

The water doesn't require you to be clean before you step in. But it also doesn't leave you dirty once you're in it. It washes. It cleanses. It transforms.

It sounds like a cliché, but it's true: Grace meets you exactly where you are. But it loves you too much to leave you there.

Grace is the only thing powerful enough to break the cycle.

You've been trying to fix yourself for how long now? To be better. To break the patterns. To stop the destructive behaviors. To heal the wounds. To fill the void.

And how's that working?

Here's the truth you already know: You can't save yourself. You can't self-help your way out of the swamp. You can't positive-think your way to wholeness. You can't earn your way to peace.

The harder you try to clean yourself up, the more exhausted you become. The more you strive to be worthy, the more you realize you're not. The more you perform, the more hollow it feels.

Grace breaks that cycle.

It says: "Stop trying. Start receiving. You can't fix this. But I can. Let Me."

Why do you need grace?

Because you're human. And being human means:

- **You're broken.** Not "a little flawed." Actually broken. Your best efforts produce mixed results. Your purest motives are tangled with selfishness. Your greatest strengths have shadow sides. You hurt people you love. You betray your own values. You make messes you can't clean up.
- **You're thirsty.** There's a deep thirst in you that nothing in this world can satisfy. Not success. Not relationships. Not pleasure. Not achievement. Not even love from other people. You've tried to fill it, and everything you pour in leaks out. You need living water—water that becomes a spring within you, never running dry.
- **You're stuck.** The swamp has you. The patterns repeat. The wounds won't heal. The shame won't lift. The void won't fill. You know you need to change, but you can't seem to do it. Knowledge

isn't enough. Willpower isn't enough. Trying harder isn't enough.

- **You're exhausted.** The performance is killing you. The pretending is draining you. The striving is crushing you. You're tired of holding it all together. Tired of the mask. Tired of the hustle. You need rest—real rest—the kind that goes soul-deep.

Grace is for the broken, the thirsty, the stuck, the exhausted.

Grace is for you.

What does grace do?

Grace does what you cannot do for yourself. It forgives—taking the weight of your past and saying, "This doesn't define you anymore. You're free." It heals—not just surface wounds but the deep ones you've been medicating for years. It transforms—not through willpower but through the power of being truly loved. And it sustains—not as a one-time event but as a river that keeps flowing, a source you return to every day.

Grace is not a thing. It's a Person.

Here's the deepest truth: Grace isn't just a concept or a force. Grace is the character of God. It's who He is.

God doesn't just give grace. He is grace.

When you encounter grace, you're encountering God. When you receive grace, you're receiving Him. When you're washed by grace, you're being held by Love itself.

That's why the water is called "living water." It's not just H₂O. It's the presence of God flowing into your life, into your soul, into your deepest places.

And that's why you need it. Not just to feel better. Not just to be a better person. But to know—truly know—that you're loved, you're forgiven, you're whole, you're home.

There's a moment between leaving and arriving that feels impossible.

You've left the swamp—made the decision, taken the first steps, walked away from the place that was killing you. But you haven't arrived anywhere yet. You're in the liminal space. The threshold. The water's edge.

Behind you: everything you've known. The familiar toxicity. The adaptive survival patterns. The identity you built in the muck.

Ahead of you: the unknown. Clean water that both attracts and terrifies you. An invitation you're not sure you're qualified to accept.

And here's what makes this moment so hard: the swamp is still on you. You can smell it on your clothes. Feel the dried mud cracking on your skin. Taste the bitterness in your mouth. You've left, but you're not yet clean. You've chosen freedom, but you're not yet free.

This is the water's edge—where decision meets transformation. Where leaving meets arriving. Where the old is passing away but the new hasn't yet fully come.

And the question that haunts you: Can I really step into that clean water looking like this?

Part of you wants to clean up first. Get yourself together. Become worthy of the gift before you receive it.

But there's no pre-water ritual. No "get yourself ready first" station.

Just the water. And you. And the invitation.

The writing that follows came from my time at this threshold. When I'd made the decision to leave but couldn't yet see how transformation would happen. When I stood at the edge of grace, covered in swamp, and had to learn the hardest lesson:

You don't clean up to receive grace. Grace is what cleans you up.

You kneel at the water's edge, hands trembling. The bank is soft under your knees. You lean forward, cupping your hands together, and dip them into the water.

It's shockingly cool. But also... alive. You can feel the current trying to pull your hands downstream. You can feel the movement, the energy, the power.

You lift your cupped hands to your lips and drink.

The water is cool and sweet and everything you didn't know you needed. It tastes like snow-melt and stone and something you can only call purity. It washes away the bitter taste of the swamp, the metallic tang of fear, the sour residue of shame.

You drink again. And again. Greedy for it now. Desperate for it.

And as you drink, something inside you whispers: This is what I've been thirsting for. Not just water. Living water. The kind that reaches all the way down into the dried-up, hollowed-out places and says, "I can make this live again."

You look at the river. Then at yourself. Then back at the river.

The invitation is clear: Come in. Let yourself be washed. Let the water do what you cannot do for yourself.

But can you? Can you really step into that clean water covered in all this filth? Can you trust that the water is strong enough to handle your mess?

The sun climbs higher. The mist begins to thin. And you're still kneeling at the water's edge, caught between the swamp you've left and the cleansing you need, wondering if grace is really as scandalous as they say—scandalous enough to wash even you.

Key Themes

1. Water as Metaphor for Grace, Healing, and Forgiveness

Water runs through human wisdom and spiritual literature like a river through a landscape. From ancient creation stories to modern poetry, water marks the places where transformation happens.

In the beginning, divine presence hovered over the waters and spoke order into being. Throughout ancient texts, water appears at pivotal moments: It destroys and preserves in the flood. It parts to deliver in the Exodus. It heals disease in the Jordan. It flows from rock in the wilderness.

Water is life, cleansing, healing, transformation, and abundance. Grace is all of this—made flesh in Jesus's encounter with the woman at the well:

"Jesus replied, 'Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life.'" — John 4:13-14 (NLT)

The conversation shifts. Jesus asks about her husband. She tries to deflect: "I have no husband."

Jesus responds with devastating gentleness: "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

He sees her. Completely. Knows her history. Knows her shame. Knows her secrets.

And He doesn't condemn. Doesn't lecture. Doesn't reject.

He just... sees her.

What would it feel like to be truly seen—completely known—and not condemned?

And being truly seen—without condemnation, without rejection, with nothing but love—changes everything.

She starts asking theological questions, trying to understand this man who knows her completely and still speaks to her with dignity. Jesus reveals Himself: "I, the one speaking to you—I am he." The Messiah. The one she and her people have been waiting for.

And she believes. Right there at the well. At the water's edge.

She leaves her water jar—the very thing she came for—and runs back to town. The town she'd been avoiding. And she tells everyone: "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?"

The woman who came in shame leaves as an evangelist. The woman who came alone in the heat of the day returns to bring the whole town to meet Jesus. The woman who came thirsty for water leaves having drunk from the source of living water.

That's what happens at the water's edge.

2. The Threshold – Where Obedience Meets Miracle

Or consider another story from the book of Joshua. Ancient Israel stood on the edge of the promised land after wandering forty years. Between them and the promise: the Jordan River. And it's not just flowing—it's flooding:

"It was the harvest season, and the Jordan was overflowing its banks. But as soon as the feet of the priests who were carrying the Ark touched the water at the river's edge, the water above that point began backing up a great distance away... And all the people crossed over." — Joshua 3:15-16 (NLT)

God gives Joshua strange instructions: Have the priests carrying the ark of the covenant step into the water. Not after it parts. Before. While it's still flooding.

They have to get their feet wet before the miracle happens.

Imagine being one of those priests. Carrying the most sacred object—the symbol of divine presence—toward a flooding river. Every instinct screams: Wait for the water to stop! Don't risk it! Don't step in until it's safe!

But that's not how trust works. Trust doesn't wait for risk to disappear. Trust steps in while the risk is real.

And they do it. The moment their feet touch the water's edge, the water from upstream stops flowing.

The water's edge is where obedience meets miracle. Where faith becomes sight. Where stepping forward in trust releases transformative power.

The edge is the threshold. You can stand on the shore and talk about water all day. You can study it, analyze it, understand its chemical composition. But until you step in—until your feet touch the water's edge—you don't experience it.

Eugene Peterson writes:

"The Christian life is not a quiet escape to a garden where we can walk and talk uninterruptedly with our Lord; nor is it a fantasy trip to a heavenly city where we can compare our blue ribbons and gold medals with other Christians... It is the active and loving obedience of faith, lived in the rough and tumble of this world, where God's grace intersects with human need." — Eugene Peterson, A Long Obedience in the Same Direction

The water's edge is where that intersection happens. Where grace meets our desperate need. Where theology becomes experience.

3. The Transition from Running From to Running Toward

There's a psychological and spiritual shift that happens at the water's edge. A reversal. A turning.

Before, we run from what's Real. We hide like the first humans in the garden: "I heard you, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

We flee like Jonah, running to get as far from truth's call as possible, ending up in the belly of a fish before we finally surrender.

We avoid by staying so busy with activity that we never have to face the intimacy that Reality actually wants with us.

Why do we run? Because we're afraid. Afraid Reality will see the real us and be disappointed. Afraid it will demand things we're not willing to give. Afraid we'll be rejected if we don't perform well enough. Afraid that if we get too close, we'll discover that love has conditions after all.

So we run. Or we hide. Or we stay busy. Anything to keep truth at arm's length.

But the swamp changes things. In the swamp, hiding doesn't work anymore. Performance fails. Busyness exhausts us. And we discover that we're not running from judgment—we're running from love.

Because judgment we could handle. We've been handling judgment our whole lives. Self-judgment, others' judgment, internalized shame—we know what to do with that. We perform, we prove ourselves, we try harder.

But love? Unconditional, unearned, relentless love? That's terrifying.

Because if we're loved as we are, then we have to stop performing. Stop earning. Stop hiding. And we don't know who we'd be without all that.

At the water's edge, something shifts. We stop running from and start stumbling toward.

We start seeking like the ancient poet: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you."

We start thirsting like the crowds who heard Jesus cry out: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink."

We start reaching like the woman with the issue of blood, desperate enough to push through the crowd and touch the hem of Jesus' garment because we finally realize: Our greatest danger isn't being seen in our need. Our greatest danger is dying of thirst while standing next to the fountain.

A.W. Tozer understood this desperate thirst:

"God is looking for people through whom He can do the impossible—what a pity that we plan only the things that we can do by ourselves." — A.W. Tozer, The Pursuit of God

We come to the water when we finally admit we can't save ourselves. When we stop planning what we can do and start receiving what only God can do.

For years, I ran. I was in involved, teaching, doing all the "right things"—and running. Because I was terrified He'd get too close and see the real me. The mess. The doubt. The darkness. The anger. The parts that didn't fit the image.

The swamp was awful, but at least I could hide there. At least the mud covered me. At least I could blend into the murk and no one—not even God—could see clearly.

But at the water's edge, I couldn't hide anymore. I was exposed. Vulnerable. Raw.

And I realized: I wasn't running from judgment. I was running from love.

The water's edge is where I stopped running from God and started stumbling toward Him. Where I discovered that the most honest prayer

I could pray wasn't "Make me good enough." It was "See me as I am—and please don't turn away."

And He didn't. He doesn't. He never does.

4. Baptism: Death to Old, Birth to New

Baptism is the ritual of the water's edge—the physical enactment of what happens spiritually when we come to God.

Baptism is obedience. Even Jesus submitted to baptism, telling John the Baptist: "It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires" (Matthew 3:15, NLT). After His resurrection, Jesus commanded His followers: "Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19, NLT). This isn't optional—it's a command.

Baptism is death and resurrection. Going under the water: Death. Burial of the old self. The swamp-covered, broken version of you dies. Coming up out of the water: Resurrection. New life. You emerge clean, forgiven, made new.

This isn't just metaphor. Paul says it's spiritually real:

"For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was." — Romans 6:4-5 (NLT)

When you go under the water, you're united with Christ in His death. When you come up, you're united with Him in His resurrection.

Why baptism matters: It's obedience to Jesus's command. It's your public declaration before witnesses—"I belong to Jesus now." It's a spiritual marker, a covenant moment that changes something we don't fully understand. And it's your initiation into the community of believers.

Have you considered baptism?

If you prayed that prayer earlier in this chapter—if you invited God into your soul—then baptism is your next step. Not because you have to earn anything, but because obedience flows from love. Because public declaration solidifies private decision. Because there's something powerful about going under the water and coming up new.

Talk to a pastor. Find a church community. Schedule your baptism. Step into the water.

Standing at the water's edge forever isn't the goal. The goal is to step in. To go under. To come up new.

And if you've already been baptized, remember your baptism. Remember the old you that died and the new you that rose. Remember the covenant you made, the identity you claimed, the life you said yes to.

Baptism isn't only about our pledge to God—it's also about God's pledge to us. The water's edge is where we receive what Love offers, not where we prove we're worthy to receive it.

5. The Vulnerability of Letting Yourself Be Washed

There's something deeply vulnerable about being washed. To be washed, you have to be touched. You have to let someone see the dirt. You have to stop hiding.

This is the tender, terrifying heart of the chapter.

Think about Jesus washing the disciples' feet in John 13:

"When Jesus came to Simon Peter, Peter said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus replied, 'You don't understand now what I am doing, but someday you will.' 'No,' Peter protested, 'you will never ever wash my feet!' Jesus replied, 'Unless I wash you, you won't belong to me.'"
— John 13:6-8 (NLT)

It's the night before His crucifixion. Jesus knows what's coming. And He takes off His outer garment, wraps a towel around His waist, pours water into a basin, and begins washing their feet.

Peter's reaction is classic: "No, you will never ever wash my feet!"

Why? Because it's humiliating. The Master shouldn't serve the servant. The clean shouldn't touch the dirty. This is backwards. Wrong. Uncomfortable.

But Jesus says something profound: "Unless I wash you, you won't belong to me."

Let that sink in. Unless I wash you. Not "unless you wash yourself." Not "unless you clean up first." Unless I wash you.

What's He saying? You're already loved. Already accepted. Already Mine. You just need to let Me serve you. Let Me wash the parts of you that have gotten dirty walking through this world. Let Me touch the places you think are too shameful, too broken, too contaminated.

For us, the vulnerability is this: Admitting we need washing. Admitting we can't clean ourselves up. Admitting we're dirty and letting Love touch the dirt.

That's terrifying. Because what if it recoils? What if even grace has limits? What if I'm too much even for living water?

But the wayfarer at the water's edge discovers: Grace has no limits. Grace washes what shame says is unwashable. Grace touches what fear says is untouchable.

Timothy Keller illuminates this scandalous grace:

"The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope." — Timothy Keller, The Meaning of Marriage

This is the water's edge truth: You're worse than you thought—and more loved than you imagined. Both at the same time.

At the water's edge, I was trying hard to practice vulnerability and connection. I was meeting with friends, making progress on creative projects, engaging in introspection and prayer. Outwardly, momentum was building.

But I was also exhausted. Disconnected at times. Empty in ways I couldn't quite articulate.

The water's edge isn't instant healing. It's the beginning of healing. You can be making real progress and still feel the weight of the journey. That's not failure—that's honesty.

Ruth Haley Barton writes about this tender in-between place:

"Transformation is not about trying harder or doing more. It is about entering more deeply into the mystery of our own belovedness... and trusting the process that is beyond our control." — Ruth Haley Barton, Sacred Rhythms

At the water's edge, we learn to trust the process even when we can't control the outcome. We step in, covered in mud, and trust the water to do what only water can do.

You can be stepping toward the water and still be covered in swamp mud. That's not hypocrisy—that's the reality of transformation. It doesn't happen all at once. It happens in stages, in steps, in moments of surrender and trust.

The Core Scripture Truth

Centuries before Jesus, a prophet spoke this invitation:

"Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink—even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine or milk—it's all free!" — Isaiah 55:1 (NLT)

Come thirsty, desperate, empty-handed. Not "pay first." Not "earn it." Just come. The water is free and waiting.

And there's another invitation, spoken by Jesus at a festival in Jerusalem:

"On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, 'Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, "Rivers of living water will flow from his heart."' — John 7:37-38 (NLT)

Let this sink in slowly.

"Anyone who is thirsty may come to me":

Not anyone who's good enough. Not anyone who's cleaned up. Not anyone who's figured it out. Not anyone who's earned it.

Anyone who's thirsty.

Are you thirsty? Parched. Dry. Desperate for something that will actually satisfy. Then you qualify. That's the only requirement: thirst.

"Anyone who believes in me may come and drink":

Not come to religion. Not come to rules. Not come to a system or a program or a set of principles.

Come to Me. Jesus. Person. Presence. The source of living water.

And drink. Receive. Take in. Stop trying to earn it and just receive it. Open your mouth and let the water in. Let it quench the thirst you've been carrying for years.

"Rivers of living water will flow from his heart":

Not a trickle. Rivers. Plural. Not scarcity—abundance. Not barely enough—overflowing.

Not stagnant water. Living water. Water that moves, that flows, that brings life wherever it goes.

Not external only. From within—internal transformation that flows outward. You don't just get washed on the outside. You become a source of living water yourself. The Spirit dwells in you, and what flows from you is the same life-giving, cleansing, healing water that you received.

John adds commentary: "By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive."

Living water equals the Holy Spirit. God's very presence dwelling in you. Not visiting occasionally. Not hovering nearby. Dwelling. Making His home. Taking up residence in the deepest parts of you.

This is the promise at the water's edge: You will be filled. Not just cleaned. Filled. With God's Spirit. God's life. God's love. And it will flow from you like a river—life-giving, cleansing, healing—to everyone around you.

The invitation stands: "Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink!"

Come to the water's edge. Come as you are—muddy, ashamed, broken, desperate. Come thirsty. And drink.

The Wayfarer Moment

You don't clean yourself up before you come to the water. You come to the water to be cleaned.

This is the scandal of grace. The offense of it. The relief of it.

You don't have to fix yourself first. You can't. That's the whole point.

You come as you are. Mud-covered. Shame-soaked. Exhausted from trying and failing. Broken from years of pretending. Thirsty beyond

words.

And grace washes you.

For months—maybe years, if I'm honest—I'd been wrestling with unworthiness. Watching other people experience breakthrough, healing, transformation. Hearing their testimonies of miracles. Witnessing the joy that comes when someone is made whole.

And feeling... nothing. Except the growing conviction that miracles were for other people. Not for me.

I felt like a lost cause. Weighed down by shame so heavy I could barely breathe. I was angry at God. I shouted at Him in the darkness: "Why not me, Lord? Why am I not deserving? If You were truly a God of love and compassion, You are the one I would be serving. But You're not showing up for me."

I walked away that night. Heart hardened. Or so I told myself.

But the hardness was a lie. Underneath it was crushing hope—hope that there could be a Savior who actually loved me, who would actually pay my debt. Hope that had been beaten down so many times it had learned to hide behind anger.

The turning point came in April 2014. I flew to Oklahoma City to visit my best friend. That night, I went to watch the Thunder play the Spurs—trying to escape, to forget about my miserable lot in life, to flee from how I'd destroyed my family and marriage.

But you know what they say: The only problem with running is that everywhere you go, you're there.

The next morning I woke up, and I was still there. Still carrying the mess I'd created back home. I decided it was time to do some work on my life. Which meant—for me—going somewhere to think, to pray, to meditate.

Oklahoma City, Lake Hefner

I found myself at Lake Hefner in North Oklahoma City, sitting at the end of a boat ramp. Figuratively, it looked like my life: the end of the road.

What would I do?

I walked to the end of the boat ramp. Sat down. Contemplated my situation. Still wearing my mask. Still pretending I had it together. Still performing rather than being real.

How do you break free from yourself? From the bondage that keeps you enslaved to shame and performance and the need to look good?

I put my headphones on and played a song—"Word of God Speak" by MercyMe—over and over and over. And I wept completely, from the deepest part of my inner being.

I'm finding myself at a loss for words

And the funny thing is it's okay

The last thing I need is to be heard

But to hear what You would say

Word of God speak

Would You pour down like rain

Washing my eyes to see

Your majesty

To be still and know

That You're in this place

Please let me stay and rest

In Your holiness

Word of God speak

What happened next? I guess I'll just say: I received my miracle.

I stepped off the end of the road and started walking toward the water. With each step, I asked the Holy Spirit to embrace me. Asked God to give me a much-needed miracle in my life.

I put my feet into the water. The Living Water's Edge.

And I was comforted in knowing: it's going to be okay.

The water didn't recoil from my shame. It didn't reject the mess I'd made. It received me. Cool, real, life-giving.

That's grace. Not the reward for cleaning up. The power that cleanses.

That moment became my permission slip. Permission to admit I wanted a miracle. Permission to confess I felt unworthy. Permission to take off the mask and come to the water's edge as I actually was—broken, desperate, thirsty.

The writing that follows came from that day. The song came later, as these raw confessions transformed into declaration. The writing asks questions: Have you ever wanted a miracle? Have you ever seen one? The song answers: Come to the living water's edge. The miracle is available. You can be made whole.

The writing is the struggle. The song is the musical translation.

Song Integration

Standing at Lake Hefner's boat ramp that April morning, I was at the end of myself. The boat ramp descends into the lake, pavement giving way to water—a threshold between termination and transformation. The road I'd been traveling—self-sufficiency, performance, earning worthiness—had run out. The pavement simply stopped. And beyond it: water.

"Living Water's Edge" emerges from the tension between two biblical realities: our profound unworthiness and God's scandalous willingness to make us whole anyway. This isn't a song about people who stumbled slightly. This is about people "burdened down by guilt and shame, no hope to be relieved"—the terminally stuck, the chronically unworthy, those who've given up hope that miracles are for them.

The opening verse asks: "Have you longed for a miracle, felt unworthy to believe?" This is the honest cry of someone who's watched God move in other lives while convinced they're somehow disqualified. But then the verse pivots with devastating grace: "Jesus stands with arms wide open, He's the Savior of your soul." Not "Jesus will open His arms once you prove yourself." Jesus *stands*—present tense, already positioned—with arms *wide open*. The posture precedes the person's arrival. The welcome exists before the worthiness.

This echoes the father in Luke 15 who sees the prodigal "while he was still a long way off" and runs to him. Grace doesn't wait at the finish line. Grace runs toward us while we're still covered in pig slop, still rehearsing apologies, still convinced we'll be lucky to be hired as servants.

Verse two shifts to testimony: "Have you seen a heart surrendered, healed by mercy's gentle hand?" Mercy's hand is *gentle*—crucial because those who've lived with shame expect punishment. They brace for the blow. But mercy is gentle precisely because it knows how fragile the shame-bearer is. "Bring your pain and all your burdens; leave them at the cross tonight." The invitation is comprehensive—not "bring your acceptable struggles" but "all your burdens." And the timing—"tonight"—creates urgency through availability. Why wait? Why carry it another day?

"Let His power make you righteous, shining pure in holy light." This is imputed righteousness—we're made right not through our effort but through Christ's finished work. The agency belongs to God. Our part is reception, not production.

The chorus declares: "Come and drink the living water, let it wash your fear away." This references John 7:37-38—Jesus's invitation to the thirsty. Notice what the water washes away: fear. Not just guilt, but the fear underneath—fear of rejection, exposure, fear that we're unlovable at the core. "Jesus breaks the chains that bind you; He's your miracle today." Not "might break" or "will consider." He *breaks* them. Present tense. And He's your miracle *today*—not someday, not after you've earned it. Today.

The bridge intensifies the desperation: "Have you felt the weight of sorrow, like a chain you cannot break?" This is learned helplessness—you've tried so many times to change that you've given up trying. But into this darkness: "Jesus sees your every struggle, and He whispers, 'You are Mine.'" Not "You'll be Mine if you fix yourself." *You are Mine*. Present possession. The claim precedes the change.

"Through His grace, the chains will shatter; you will rise in love divine." The chains don't gradually loosen—they *shatter*. Complete break. Total freedom. "Lift your hands and call upon Him; He will meet you where you stand." Romans 10:13—no prerequisites, no qualifications. Just call. And He meets you *where you stand*—in the mess, at the dead end, covered in shame.

This song became my declaration that I was wrong about grace. Grace *is* for me. Miracles *are* for me. Not because I earned them, but because Jesus stands with arms wide open and says, "You are Mine." Worthiness isn't the prerequisite. Thirst is. The living water's edge isn't for the worthy. It's for the thirsty. The miracle isn't that the water changes you before you enter—the miracle is that the water receives you exactly as you are, and *then* begins the transformation from the inside out.

Lyrics: Living Water's Edge

(Verse 1)

Have you longed for a miracle, felt unworthy to believe?
Burdened down by guilt and shame, no hope to be relieved.
In the darkness, you have wondered, "Can I ever be made whole?"
Jesus stands with arms wide open, He's the Savior of your soul.

(Verse 2)

Have you seen a heart surrendered, healed by mercy's gentle hand?
Felt the joy of restoration, love you cannot understand?
Bring your pain and all your burdens; leave them at the cross tonight.
Let His power make you righteous, shining pure in holy light.

(Chorus)

Have you seen a miracle, felt His love that sets you free?
It's a gift beyond all measure, full of grace and majesty.
Come and drink the living water, let it wash your fear away.
Jesus breaks the chains that bind you; He's your miracle today.

(Verse 3)

Have you felt the weight of sorrow, like a chain you cannot break?
Every step feels weak and heavy, every move a deep mistake.
Jesus sees your every struggle, and He whispers, "You are Mine."
Through His grace, the chains will shatter; you will rise in love divine.

(Bridge)

Lift your hands and call upon Him; He will meet you where you stand.
Every tear and cry of sorrow, He will hold within His hand.

Feel the freedom in His presence, leave your past and walk His way.

Jesus loves you and redeems you; He's your miracle today.

(Chorus)

Have you seen a miracle, felt His love that sets you free?

It's a gift beyond all measure, full of grace and majesty.

Come and drink the living water, let it wash your fear away.

Jesus breaks the chains that bind you; He's your miracle today.

(Outro)

He's your miracle today,

Jesus is your miracle today.

Key Takeaways

- **You don't clean up to receive grace; grace cleans you up.** The water doesn't recoil from your mud—it washes it away. Come as you are, covered in swamp, and let the living water do what only it can do.
- **Grace is scandalously free—and that's the point.** You can't earn it, deserve it, or repay it. It's a gift for the thirsty, the broken, the stuck, and the exhausted—which means it's for you.
- **Being fully known and fully loved is possible.** The woman at the well discovered that Jesus sees everything and still offers living water. Transparency isn't rejection—it's the doorway to real relationship.
- **Baptism is both death and birth.** Going under symbolizes dying to the old self; coming up represents resurrection to new

life. This public declaration marks your covenant and identity transformation.

Reflections for the Road

These aren't homework. They're invitations. Gentle questions to help you engage with your own thirst, your own need for living water.

Questions for the Journey:

1. Where are you with the water? Still in the swamp? At the edge? Already in, being washed?

Be honest about where you actually are, not where you think you should be. If you're still in the swamp, that's okay. If you're at the edge but afraid to step in, that's okay too. Grace meets you where you are.

2. What's keeping you from stepping into the water? Fear? Shame? Unworthiness? The belief that you have to clean up first?

Name the obstacle. Shame loses its power when it's brought into the light. Fear shrinks when it's spoken aloud. What's the lie you're believing about grace?

3. Read John 4 slowly. Put yourself in the woman's place. What does Jesus see in you? What does He offer?

This isn't theological study. This is personal encounter. Imagine yourself at the well. Imagine Jesus asking you for a drink. Imagine Him seeing everything you've ever done—and offering you living water anyway.

4. What would it mean to stop trying to clean yourself up and just come to the water?

What would change if you stopped performing? Stopped trying to earn grace? Stopped waiting to be good enough? What if you came as you are—right now, in this moment, with all your mess—and let grace

wash you?

Practice: The Water Ritual

If possible, find actual water. A river, a lake, the ocean, even a bathtub. If none of those are accessible, a bowl of water will do. The physical act helps the spiritual truth sink in.

Take off your shoes. If you're at a river or lake or ocean, step in. Feel the water on your feet, your ankles. If you're at a bathtub, fill it and step in. If you're using a bowl, dip your hands in.

Feel the water. Cool or warm. Flowing or still. Just feel it. Let yourself be present to the sensation.

Pray this prayer, or something like it in your own words:

"God, I come to the water. I can't clean myself up. I've tried and I've failed and I'm tired of trying. But I believe You can wash me. I receive Your grace. I receive Your living water. Wash me. Make me clean. Fill me with Your Spirit. Let rivers of living water flow from within me."

Cup water in your hands if you're at a natural body of water or using a bowl. Pour it over your head, your arms, your feet. Each time, whisper: "Grace."

If you're in a bathtub, dunk yourself under. Go all the way under, if you can. Stay under for a moment. Let it be a death—a burial of the old self, the shame, the performance, the unworthiness. Then come up. Resurrection. New life. New creation.

The physical act matters. Jesus used physical water in baptism for a reason. We're embodied beings. We need to feel grace, not just think about it.

So feel the water. Let it wash over you. Let it be a tangible reminder: Grace is real. Living water is real. And it's available to you.

Closing Image

You're standing in the water now. Not all the way in—just ankles deep. Just enough to feel it's real. Cool and shocking and clean.

The mud from the swamp is starting to wash away. Not instantly. Not all at once. But gradually. With each step deeper, more of it lifts off. Carried downstream by the current.

You look down at your feet. You can see them through the water. Clear. The stones beneath them smooth and solid.

You look at your hands. Still muddy. But less than before.

You cup water and pour it over your arms. Watch the mud run off in brown streams. Underneath: skin. Your actual skin. You'd almost forgotten what it looked like.

You're still a mess. You're still covered in swamp. But you're also being washed. Both are true at the same time.

Take a breath.

This is the water's edge. Not instant transformation. The beginning of transformation. Not immediate perfection. The start of healing.

You take another step. The water rises to your knees. Colder. Stronger current. But also... invigorating. Alive.

You're wading in. One step at a time. Letting the water do what you could never do for yourself.

And somewhere deep inside, beneath the shame and the fear and the exhaustion, something stirs. Something that feels almost like... hope.

Not the fragile, easily crushed hope you've known before. But something sturdier. Something rooted not in your ability to clean yourself up, but in the water's ability to wash you.

Living water.

You're at the water's edge. And you're wading in. And it's the beginning of everything.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 6)

MOVEMENT 2: AT THE WATER'S EDGE (The Turning)

Chapter 6: In the Shadow of Your Grace

"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." — Psalm 91:1

In the Shadow of Your Grace

Listen at: <http://go.skylertthomas.com/wqg9eX>



Scan to listen: In the Shadow of Your Grace

An Invitation to Reflect

You've walked through five chapters now. You've named the swamp, cried out for help, made a decision to move, let something die, and stepped into living water.

Maybe you've even accepted baptism—that powerful symbol of death to the old and birth to the new.

But now I need to ask you something important:

How seriously have you been able to accept God? To accept Jesus? To accept the living water of baptism washing over you?

Are these just ideas you're entertaining? Nice concepts you're considering? Or are you actually letting them change you?

Because here's what I've discovered: there's a difference between acknowledging truth and living in it. Between knowing about the water and actually staying immersed in it.

You've made it this far. But the journey doesn't end at the water's edge. The question is: **Are you ready to continue this journey dwelling in the living water and moving forward with your life?**

Not going back to the swamp. Not just standing at the edge analyzing. But actually walking forward, day by day, learning what it means to live washed, sheltered, and held by grace.

This isn't about perfection. It's about direction. It's about choosing, again and again, to stay in the water rather than retreat to what's familiar.

So before you read further, pause. Consider:

Can you say, even imperfectly: "God, I'm choosing to stay in the water. I'm choosing to keep walking forward. I'm choosing to let Your love define me, even when it's hard, even when the wilderness stretches ahead, even when I don't understand everything yet."

That's enough. That's the commitment that opens what comes next.

Because in this chapter, you're going to discover something crucial: Grace doesn't just wash you. Grace shelters you for the journey ahead.

Have you ever been disappointed that healing didn't look the way you expected?

You thought getting out of the swamp meant the hard part was over. You thought grace would whisk you away to some peaceful place where everything would finally be easy.

But here you are. You've been washed. You've stepped into the water. You've felt grace begin its work.

And you're discovering that there's still a journey ahead. Still hard terrain. Still scorching days and uncertain paths.

Maybe you're wondering: *Is this all there is? Did I leave the swamp just to end up in a desert?*

I've been there. And here's what I learned: Grace doesn't always look like escape. Sometimes grace looks like shelter.

Can I show you what I mean?

You've been washed. You've stepped into the water, felt grace begin its work, experienced the first cleansing. And you thought—maybe you hoped—that would be the end of the hard part.

But you're discovering something: leaving the swamp doesn't mean instant arrival in paradise. There's a wilderness between the swamp and the promised land. A space of formation. A season of walking.

And the wilderness is hard in different ways.

The swamp was toxic and suffocating. The wilderness is exposed and relentless. In the swamp, you couldn't breathe. In the wilderness, you feel every scorching reality. Heat beats down. The path stretches endlessly. Your resources feel insufficient.

This is where many wayfarers give up. They expect grace to remove them from all difficulty. Eliminate every trial. Make life comfortable and easy. And when they discover grace does something different—provides shelter within the trial rather than escape from it—they're tempted to turn back.

But here's what you're learning: grace isn't just rescue from the pit. Grace is also shelter in the wilderness.

The shadow doesn't eliminate the sun. It provides covering under it.

Grace doesn't always remove the hard season. It shelters you through it.

This chapter is about dwelling in that shadow. About learning that presence in the midst of difficulty is grace enough. That you don't face the heat alone.

The writing that follows came from my wilderness season. When I'd been washed but not yet arrived. When I had to learn that grace isn't always escape—sometimes it's shelter. And that shelter is enough.

Key Themes

1. Grace as Shelter, Not Escape

We often think of grace as removal from difficult circumstances. Take away the pain. Change the situation. Fix what's broken. Make it all better.

But the shadow of grace works differently.

The shadow doesn't remove the sun—it provides covering under it. Grace doesn't always eliminate the trial—it shelters us through it.

This is the scandal we don't want to hear: sometimes the answer to "Deliver me from this" is "I will be with you in it."

Consider Psalm 91:1-2:

"Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare about the LORD: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I trust him." — Psalm 91:1-2 (NLT)

Notice the language: shelter, shadow, refuge, fortress. Not words of elimination—words of protection. A fortress doesn't remove the enemy; it protects you from the enemy. A shelter doesn't stop the storm; it covers you during it.

The psalmist is dwelling *in* the shelter, resting *in* the shadow. Not after the danger passes. Not once everything's resolved.

In the midst of it.

This is where we learn the difference between *comfort* and *presence*. We pray for comfort—removal of difficulty. God often gives presence—companionship through difficulty.

The shadow of grace says: "I won't leave you in this alone."

In the shadow, we discover a profound truth: God doesn't give us a list of things to change in ourselves. He gives us Himself. The more we gaze at Him, the more we become aware of our need, and the more we become aware that only He can meet it.

We're not fixing ourselves—we're gazing at the One who shelters us. And in that gazing, transformation happens.

2. Hiding IN God vs. Hiding FROM God

There are two kinds of hiding. Understanding the difference changes everything.

Hiding FROM is what the first humans did after they failed. Fear-driven. Shame-motivated. Trying to avoid being seen, known, exposed. This hiding isolates us, deepens our wounds, keeps us from the very healing we need.

Hiding IN is what ancient poets described in their prayers. Trust-driven. Safety-seeking. Running toward shelter for covering, not away in fear. This hiding heals, restores, connects us to our true identity.

The original writing from the blog captures this journey:

"What can wash away my shame, or will I live forever in its grip, squeezing the very life out of my soul, leaving me to rot on the heap of humanity? Have I walked too far beyond the boundary of grace, only to look back and see nothing but emptiness, leaving me to fend for myself in this world, sliding faster and faster to death and destruction?"

This is the voice of someone hiding FROM. Convinced they've gone too far. Believing grace has limits. Fending for themselves because they think they have to.

But then the shift:

"But then I stop. I don't move in any direction. I bow down and listen. And I hear Your voice—just the whisper of Your voice—pleading with me to return, to simply turn around and walk."

From hiding FROM to hiding IN. From running away to turning around. From isolation to invitation.

In the shadow of grace, we don't hide our shame—we bring it into the light of covering. We don't pretend we're okay—we admit we're not and find that the shadow is big enough to cover all of it.

Hiding IN is a practice—a lifelong habit of running toward shelter, not away from it. The way we live our lives shapes us deeply. Practice living in presence now, learning to dwell in the shadow. We learn to live in the shadow now so that we know where home is when the final shadow falls.

3. Psalm 91 Theology: Dwelling in the Shelter

Psalms 91 is the bedrock text for understanding shadow grace. Let's look at the full passage:

"Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare about the LORD: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I trust him. For he will rescue you from every trap and protect you from deadly disease. He will cover you with his feathers. He will shelter you with his wings. His faithful promises are your armor and protection." — Psalm 91:1-4 (NLT)

This isn't a one-time transaction. It's a posture. *Dwelling. Resting.* Living in the shelter, not just visiting it.

Notice the progression:

- **Shelter** (protective covering)
- **Shadow** (evidence of presence)
- **Refuge and fortress** (safety from enemies)
- **Covering with feathers** (tender, intimate protection)
- **Faithfulness as shield** (character as our defense)

The protection isn't mechanical—it's relational. Like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings, the covering isn't from a distance but with nearness, with tenderness, with the warmth of presence.

Pause and consider: What would it mean to dwell—not just visit, but live—in the shelter of what's Real?

Oswald Chambers writes:

"Never make the blunder of trying to forecast the way God is going to answer your prayer. God's way of answering prayer is infinitely more wonderful than our expectations. He always transcends our expectations." — Oswald

Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest

We expect God to remove the danger. He gives us His shadow instead—covering us in ways infinitely more wonderful than we imagined. Not escape, but presence. Not removal, but shelter.

4. Shadow as Evidence of Light

Here's the theological richness we often miss: shadow is proof of light.

You can't have shadow without a light source. The deeper the shadow, the brighter the light casting it. So when we talk about dwelling in the shadow of grace, we're acknowledging something profound: *Reality itself is the light.*

"The LORD is my light and my salvation—so why should I be afraid? The LORD is my fortress, protecting me from danger, so why should I tremble?" — Psalm 27:1 (NLT)

The shadow isn't absence of light—it's the shape light makes when it encounters the substance of divine presence. We rest in that shadow, and in doing so, we're closer to the light than we've ever been.

In the swamp, we couldn't see the light. The muck blocked it out. Darkness was all we knew.

At the water's edge, in the transition, we discover the shadow. We're not yet walking fully in the light, but we're covered by it.

The shadow proves the light is real, present, strong enough to shelter us.

5. Learning to Rest Under the Covering

The blog devotional speaks to this:

"How do I trust after all these years? My shame is great, my faith is weak, and I'm tired. I heard You say, 'Come to Me, and I will give you rest.'"

Rest isn't passivity. It's trust. It's the active decision to stop striving, stop performing, stop trying to earn what's already been given.

Under the covering, we learn to:

- Stop running from the shame and bring it into the shadow
- Stop trying to be strong enough and admit we're weak
- Stop hiding our doubt and confess our questions
- Stop performing faith and simply receive grace

John Ortberg offers this insight:

"Hurry is not just a disordered schedule. Hurry is a disordered heart." — John Ortberg, The Life You've Always Wanted

When we live in hurry, we are living in a way that says we are too busy for what matters, too busy for the people we love, too busy to notice the beauty around us.

Resting in the shadow means unhurrying our hearts. Slowing down enough to notice we're covered. Sheltered. Held. We can't experience presence at breakneck speed.

Want to hear what the psalmist discovered about this?

This is the kind of rest David wrote about:

"Let all that I am wait quietly before God, for my hope is in him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress where I will not be shaken." — Psalm 62:5-6 (NLT)

Find rest in God.

Not in having everything figured out. Not in perfect circumstances. Not in the absence of trials. In God alone.

This is soul-rest. The kind of rest that comes not from the absence of struggle but from the presence of God in the struggle. You're weary, burdened, exhausted—but you're sheltered. You're in His shadow. And in that shadow, your soul can find rest.

6. Resting in the Mystery

The chapter outline notes: *"Someone asked me once: 'The mystery—is it ours to figure out, or to revere?' In the shadow of grace, we learn it's the latter."*

We don't have to understand everything. We don't have to have it all figured out. We don't have to explain how grace works or why God chooses to shelter us rather than remove the trial.

We just have to know we're covered. Sheltered. Held.

The shadow teaches us that ways are higher than our ways. That thoughts are not our thoughts. That there's mystery in how reality works, and that mystery isn't a problem to solve—it's an invitation to trust.

In the shadow, we stop trying to be experts who have all the answers and become children who simply rest in the arms that hold us.

A.W. Tozer beautifully expresses this tension:

"God is so vastly wonderful, so utterly and completely delightful that He can, without anything other than Himself, meet and overflow the deepest demands of our total nature, mysterious and deep as that nature is." — A.W. Tozer, The Knowledge of the Holy

The mystery isn't a problem—it's an invitation. In the shadow, we discover that not understanding everything doesn't diminish our trust. It deepens our wonder.

Stories of Shadow

Want to hear some ancient stories about this kind of shelter?

Ruth Under Boaz's Wing (Ruth 2:12)

Picture Ruth in the harvest fields of Bethlehem. She's a Moabite widow in a foreign land—no husband, no security, no legal protection. Jewish law allows the poor to glean—to follow behind the harvesters and gather whatever grain they drop or leave behind. It's backbreaking work, hot and humiliating, and you're completely at the mercy of the field owner's generosity.

Ruth bends and gathers, bends and gathers, working from sunrise in fields that aren't hers, gleaning scraps to keep herself and her mother-in-law Naomi from starving. She's vulnerable. Exposed. A foreign woman alone among men who could exploit her or drive her away.

Then Boaz, the field owner, notices her. He asks who she is. And when he learns she's the Moabite woman who left everything—her homeland, her people, her gods—to follow Naomi and Naomi's God, he speaks a blessing over her that captures the heart of shadow grace:

"May the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully for what you have done." — Ruth 2:12 (NLT)

Ruth had left everything to come under the wing-shadow of Yahweh. She sought shelter in the God of Israel even though she had no guarantee He would provide. She was vulnerable, at risk, exposed—but she came under His wings.

And what happens? God provides through Boaz. Protects her from harm. Covers her in the harvest field. Redeems her story completely—she marries Boaz, bears a son named Obed, and becomes part of the lineage of King David and Jesus Himself.

Shadow grace doesn't promise comfort or ease. But it promises covering. And under that covering, redemption happens.

Israelites Under the Cloud (Exodus 13:21-22)

When God led Israel out of Egypt into the wilderness, He didn't remove the wilderness. The desert was still scorching hot by day, the sun beating down on sand and rock with no trees for shelter, no streams for relief. At night, the temperature plummeted—bitter cold under a vast sky of stars.

But God didn't leave them exposed. He accompanied them:

"By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people." — Exodus 13:21-22

Imagine waking up in the desert camp, the sun just rising, heat already building. You look ahead and there it is—the cloud. Massive. Moving slowly in front of the camp. Leading. And as you walk behind it, you notice: it's not just showing direction. It's providing shade. Shadow. Covering from the relentless sun.

The cloud wasn't just navigation—it was mercy. Protection. Visible, tangible proof that God was present, leading, sheltering. In the scorching wilderness, that shadow meant the difference between survival and death.

At night, the cloud transformed into fire—warmth in the cold, light in the darkness, constant reminder that they weren't alone.

God didn't teleport them to the promised land. He walked them through the wilderness, step by step, mile by mile. But He never left them exposed. The shadow of His presence covered them every single day of the journey.

Jesus' Lament Over Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37)

Perhaps the most heartbreaking image of shadow grace comes from Jesus Himself:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather you together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing." — Matthew 23:37

The tender image: a hen gathering her chicks under her wings. When danger comes, the mother hen doesn't run. She spreads her wings and calls her chicks to safety beneath her. She covers them with her own body, willing to take the blow herself to protect them.

This is the heart of God. Longing to gather us. Aching to cover us. Willing to take the wounds so we can be sheltered.

But—and here's the tragedy—we have to be willing. We have to come. We have to run to the shelter instead of away from it.

The shadow is there. The wings are spread. The invitation is given. Will we come?

Deep Dive: Psalm 91

We've touched on this psalm, but it deserves deeper exploration. Psalm 91 is the ultimate shadow-grace text:

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty... He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday." — Psalm 91:1, 4-6

Notice what God promises:

- Shelter from terror
- Refuge from arrows

- Protection from pestilence and plague

But notice what He doesn't promise: *the absence of terror, arrows, pestilence, or plague.*

The dangers are still real. The threats still exist. But under the shadow, we're covered. The evil that would destroy us cannot penetrate the shelter of those wings.

This is shadow grace: not immunity from trial, but invincibility in trial. Not escape from danger, but safety within danger. Not the absence of the storm, but the presence of Love in the storm.

The Wayfarer Moment

Grace doesn't promise no suffering. Grace promises no suffering alone.

This is the wayfarer truth we discover in the shadow: Reality doesn't always remove the pain, but it never leaves us in it alone.

The sun still beats down. The wilderness is still real. The journey is still hard.

But we're covered. Sheltered. Never abandoned.

In the swamp, we felt alone. Isolated. Forgotten.

At the water's edge, we discover the shadow. And in that shadow, we find we were never alone at all. Love has been with us all along, waiting for us to stop running and start resting.

The shadow isn't the absence of light—it's the shape love makes when it stands between us and harm.

Song Integration

Standing in full sunlight at the height of my spiritual crisis, I wasn't basking in illumination—I was burning from exposure. Every wound visible. Every failure on display. This is the paradox the comfortable never understand: sometimes the problem isn't darkness. Sometimes the problem is too much light—too much exposure, too much harsh truth without any corresponding shelter. You can die just as surely from exposure as from darkness.

"In the Shadow of Your Grace" emerged from that scorched place. From discovering what I needed wasn't escape from reality but shelter within it. Grace doesn't always look like removal of difficulty—sometimes grace looks like covering in the midst of it.

Western Christianity tends to emphasize victory, breakthrough, deliverance—mountains moved, trials removed, circumstances changed. But more often in the actual lived experience of faithful people, God doesn't remove the trial. He provides presence within it. Not escape, but shelter. Not deliverance from, but companionship through.

Psalms 91 establishes this theology: "Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." *Dwelling*—not visiting, not dropping by in crisis, but making your home. *Shelter* and *shadow*—protection from elements that remain present. The psalm doesn't promise the absence of "the terror of night" or "the arrow that flies by day." These threats are real and present. The promise is covering, not elimination. This is the scandal modern Christianity often tries to soften: following Jesus doesn't guarantee exemption from suffering. It guarantees we won't suffer alone.

The chapter's original writing contrasts *chronos* (chronological, measured time) with *kairos* (God's time). In *chronos*, we're trapped in relentless succession—pain continues, shame persists, the cycle repeats. But then *kairos* breaks in: God's time intersects human time. The confusion stops—not because circumstances change, but because presence enters. "I don't move in any direction / I bow down / And the roar of the world is gone for a moment / And I listen." Same

circumstances. Different time. Kairos doesn't change what's happening—it changes who's present in what's happening.

The song tracks a transformation: from fear-based hiding to faith-based hiding. From running away to running toward. "I've been running, I've been hiding, worn out from the fight." This is Genesis 3 hiding—afraid of being seen. When shame drives hiding, we hide *from* exposure because we believe being fully known means being fully rejected. "Tangled up in chains I fastened, lost inside the night." The chains are self-imposed—defense mechanisms that became prisons, protective walls that became isolation chambers.

But the song pivots: "But You call my name, You take the weight, You step right into my mistake." God doesn't wait at a safe distance for us to clean up. He steps *into* the mistake. Into the mess. "You tear the veil, You light the way"—referencing the temple veil torn at Christ's crucifixion (Matthew 27:51). What separated us from God's presence has been torn. Access is granted.

The chorus declares: "Oh, in the shadow of Your grace, every fear begins to fade." Not "instantly disappears" but "begins to fade." Shadow grace is a process. "Where mercy meets me face to face, I am free, I'm not the same!" This is the paradox: in the shadow, somehow we're face to face. The shadow isn't distance from the light source—it's proximity to it. You can only be in someone's shadow if you're close enough to be covered by them.

The bridge: "No more hiding, no more grave, Hell is shaking, heaven stays!" Resurrection language. "Chains are falling, fear erased, I am free in Jesus' name!" Not "will be free" but *am free*. Present tense. Current reality. Freedom isn't based on my progress—it's based on Jesus's finished work.

The shadow of grace teaches crucial truths: Proximity matters more than circumstances. Shelter is a form of deliverance—not from the circumstance but from facing it alone. And the shadow is evidence of light, not absence of it. You can't have shadow without a light source.

The shadow doesn't mean God is absent—it means He's standing between us and what would destroy us. In that shadow, transformation happens. Not because you're striving but because you're dwelling. Not because you're performing but because you're resting.

Lyrics: In the Shadow of Your Grace

[Verse 1]

I've been running, I've been hiding,

Worn out from the fight.

Tangled up in chains I fastened,

Lost inside the night.

[Pre-Chorus]

But You call my name, You take the weight,

You step right into my mistake.

You tear the veil, You light the way,

I won't go back, I won't be the same!

[Chorus]

Oh, in the shadow of Your grace,

Every fear begins to fade.

Where mercy meets me face to face,

I am free, I'm not the same!

[Verse 2]

I've been restless, wide-eyed, sleepless,

Haunted by my past.

But Your blood is still my ransom,

And Your love is built to last.

[Pre-Chorus]

You call my name, You take the weight,

You step right into my mistake.

You tear the veil, You light the way,

I won't go back, I won't be the same!

[Chorus]

Oh, in the shadow of Your grace,

Every fear begins to fade.

Where mercy meets me face to face,

I am free, I'm not the same!

[Bridge]

No more hiding, no more grave,

Hell is shaking, heaven stays!

Chains are falling, fear erased,

I am free in Jesus' name!

[Tag]

I won't bow down, I won't break,

Darkness runs when I say His name!

I won't bow down, I won't break,

I'm alive in Jesus' name!

[Final Chorus]

Oh, in the shadow of Your grace,

Every fear begins to fade.

Where mercy meets me face to face,

I am free, I'm not the same!

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Key Takeaways

- **Grace shelters, not just rescues.** God doesn't always remove the trial, but He covers you through it. The shadow doesn't eliminate the sun—it provides protection under it.
- **Hide IN God, not FROM God.** Running toward shelter is faith; running from exposure is fear. Bring your shame into the shadow of grace where it's covered, not hidden.
- **Shadow is proof of light.** You can't have shadow without a light source. Resting in God's shadow means you're closer to His presence than you've ever been.
- **Dwelling is different from visiting.** Psalm 91 invites you to live in the shelter, not just stop by in crisis. Make presence your primary residence, not your emergency contact.

Reflections for the Road

These aren't assignments. They're invitations to encounter shadow grace in your own life.

Questions for the Journey:

1. Where are you seeking escape when God might be offering shelter?

What trial are you begging to have removed? What if, instead of removing it, you're being invited to experience presence in it? How might that shift your prayer?

2. Are you hiding FROM or IN?

Be honest: What are you afraid will be seen if you come close? What shame are you carrying that keeps you at a distance?

Remember: The shadow of grace is for the ashamed. The broken. The weary. Come as you are.

3. What does dwelling (not just visiting) in shelter look like for you?

Psalm 91 talks about dwelling—making your home—in shelter. Not dropping by when you need something. Not visiting in crisis. Living there.

What would change if you made presence your primary residence instead of your emergency contact?

4. Read Psalm 91 slowly. Which verse speaks most to where you are right now?

Don't rush through it. Let each image sink in. Shelter. Shadow. Refuge. Fortress. Wings. Covering.

Which one makes you want to weep? Which one makes you want to rest? That's probably the one you need to sit with today.

Practice: Shadow Rest

Find a quiet place where you won't be interrupted. If possible, find actual shade—under a tree, in the shadow of a building, anywhere with a clear contrast between sun and shadow.

Sit in the shadow. Feel the temperature difference. Notice how the same sun that would scorch you is now blocked by something substantial.

Close your eyes and pray:

"God, I'm sitting in shadow right now. Physical shadow. And I need spiritual shadow too. I need Your covering. Your shelter. Your wings over me."

Name what you're carrying: the shame, the fear, the exhaustion, the trial that won't end.

Then pray:

"I don't understand why You haven't removed this. But I trust that Your shadow is enough. Cover me. Shelter me. Let me rest here, under Your wings, trusting that You're between me and the heat."

Sit there for as long as you can. Five minutes. Ten. Just rest.

Don't ask for anything else. Don't problem-solve. Don't plan. Just rest in the shadow.

This is what dwelling looks like: choosing to stay in presence even when the trial isn't over. Trusting that the shadow is sufficient.

Closing Image

You're still at the water's edge. The journey isn't over. There's more road ahead, more wilderness to cross, more unknowns to face.

But something has changed.

You're no longer running from the sun. You're resting in the shadow.

The heat is still real. The sun still beats down. The journey is still hard.

But over you, sheltering you, covering you, is the shadow of the Almighty.

Take a breath.

You look up and see the source of the shadow: Love itself, standing between you and the scorching trial. Not removing it, but covering you through it.

And you realize: this is enough. Not what you wanted, perhaps. But enough.

The shadow proves the light is real.

And where there's light, there's the One who is Light.

So you breathe. You rest. You trust.

And you take the next step, knowing you're not walking alone. The shadow moves with you. The covering remains. The presence never leaves.

You're learning to live in the shadow of grace.

And in that shadow, you're finding something you didn't expect: not escape from the wilderness, but peace within it.

Not the absence of trial, but the presence of Love in trial.

Not the end of the journey, but the strength to keep walking.

One step at a time.

Under His wings.

In the shadow of grace.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 7)

MOVEMENT 2: AT THE WATER'S EDGE (The Turning)

Chapter 7: Amazing Grace I Did Receive

*"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—
and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." —
Ephesians 2:8*

Amazing Grace

Listen at: <http://go.skylerthomas.com/UCBWc5>



Scan to listen: Amazing Grace

An Invitation to Receive

You've walked through six chapters now. You've named the swamp, cried out, decided, died to the old, stepped into the water, and discovered grace shelters you in the wilderness.

But here's a question that might make you uncomfortable:

Do you really believe you're worthy of this? Do you believe grace is actually for you?

Because if you're honest, part of you is still keeping score. Still calculating whether you've done enough, been good enough, believed hard enough to deserve what you're receiving.

Part of you is still trying to earn it.

And that's the problem. Because what comes next—what you're about to encounter in this chapter—can't be earned. Can't be deserved. Can't be worked for or achieved.

It can only be received.

Grace is the most offensive word in the language because it says: "You're getting this for free, and there's nothing you can do about it."

No performance required. No goodness quota. No earning your way in.

Just... receiving.

So I need to ask you: **Can you let go of trying to deserve it? Can you stop calculating your worthiness? Can you simply open your hands and receive what's being freely given?**

This is harder than it sounds. Because receiving grace means admitting you're the kind of person who needs it. Not someone mostly good who stumbled. Not someone who tried their best. But someone who absolutely, categorically doesn't deserve it.

A wretch, in fact.

And grace says: "That's exactly who this is for."

Before you continue reading, pause. Consider:

Can you say, even if it feels scandalous: "God, I don't deserve this. I can't earn it. I can't repay it. But I'm opening my hands to receive it anyway. Amazing grace—for a wretch like me."

That's the prayer that opens the door.

Because what comes next isn't about what you've done or who you've been. It's about what Love does for those who don't deserve it.

Keep reading. Because what comes next might offend you—or it might save you.

You know the feeling when you realize you've been given something you absolutely don't deserve?

Not a small gift. Not a favor you could repay. But something so extravagant, so unearned, so wildly disproportionate to anything you've done that it stops you in your tracks.

That's grace.

And here's what makes it so hard to receive: we've been conditioned to believe grace is for people who are mostly good. People who stumbled a little but tried their best. People who deserve a second chance because they've earned it through effort.

But that's not grace. That's mercy. That's fairness. That's getting what we've worked for.

Grace is different. Grace is scandalous.

Grace is for wretches.

Not people who stumbled—people who ran. Not people who tried their best—people who didn't even try. Not people who deserve it—people who absolutely, categorically, objectively do not.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."

Not a mostly-good person. A wretch.

This chapter is about receiving what you don't deserve. About standing at the edge of clean water while still covered in swamp mud and discovering: the water isn't waiting for you to clean up first.

The water is what cleans you up.

The writing that follows came from my encounter with scandalous grace. When I'd trampled on every gift, ignored every warning, chosen my way instead of the right way—and discovered grace wasn't done with me.

Grace, in fact, had just begun.

Key Themes

1. The Scandal of Grace: For the Undeserving

Grace is scandalous precisely because it's for people who don't deserve it. If you deserved it, it wouldn't be grace—it would be payment. A transaction. You do X, you get Y.

But grace isn't a transaction. It's a gift. Freely given to those who can never earn it, never repay it, never deserve it.

This offends us. Deeply.

Because we've been trained to believe you get what you earn. Work hard, get rewarded. Mess up, face consequences. The world runs on merit, on fairness, on getting what you deserve.

But grace shatters that entire system.

The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-9:

"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it." — Ephesians 2:8-9 (NLT)

Not by works. Not by trying harder. Not by cleaning yourself up first. By grace. Through faith. A gift.

Want to hear a story that captures this perfectly?

There's a story about a prophet named Jonah. He received a clear call from God: go to Nineveh and call the people to repentance. But Jonah fled in the opposite direction, boarding a ship to Tarshish. He thought he could outrun God, create his own path, define his own freedom.

This is our human condition—we hear what's true, but our hearts are afraid, prideful, stubborn. We think we know better. We convince ourselves that our version of freedom will bring fulfillment.

When Jonah fled, he wasn't seeking freedom—he was seeking autonomy. Control. The right to write his own story without interference. And that path led him straight into the belly of a fish, trapped in the very darkness he'd been trying to escape.

In that belly, in that darkness, Jonah cried out:

"I cried out to the LORD in my great trouble, and he answered me. I called to you from the land of the dead, and LORD, you heard me!" — Jonah 2:2 (NLT)

He didn't clean himself up first. Didn't earn the right to be heard. From the grave of his own making, from the consequences of his own rebellion, he cried out.

And God answered.

That's the scandal. God doesn't wait for us to deserve rescue. He rescues us while we're still in the belly of the whale.

Philip Yancey writes powerfully about this scandal:

"Grace is the most dangerous, revolutionary, unexpected, and free force the world has ever seen or will ever see. It is wild and uncontrollable. When people taste it, they become addicted to it." — Philip Yancey, What's So Amazing About Grace?

Grace is dangerous precisely because it refuses to play by our rules. It doesn't wait for worthiness. It doesn't demand payment. It just gives—freely, scandalously, outrageously.

2. Trading True Freedom for False Freedom

The writing from the blog captures this perfectly:

"I traded it in for my version of freedom / Ruling others from my own throne / Instead of following the Master's plan / I wrote one of my own."

We think freedom means autonomy. No rules. No boundaries. No one telling us what to do. We sit on our self-made thrones and convince ourselves we're liberated.

But autonomy isn't freedom. It's slavery in disguise.

When we attempt to rule our own lives without what's Real guiding us, we don't escape constraints—we just exchange life-giving boundaries for the soul-crushing bondage of our own making. We become enslaved to our appetites. Our pride. Our need to control. Our fear of being exposed.

The freedom we think we've found leads us down a dead-end path.

And at the end of that path? A grave. Not physical death necessarily, but spiritual death. Isolation. Emptiness. The slow suffocation of a soul trying to live on its own terms.

Real freedom isn't found in throwing off all restraints. Real freedom is found in surrender.

Jesus says in John 8:36:

"So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free." — John 8:36 (NLT)

Not freedom to do whatever we want. Freedom to become who we were created to be. Freedom from the tyranny of self. Freedom to live in the flow of love instead of fighting against it.

Timothy Keller captures this paradox:

"The Christian gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time." — Timothy Keller, The Prodigal God

True freedom isn't found in ruling our own throne—it's found in bowing before the only One who died to set us free. That's the freedom Jonah discovered in the belly of the fish, the freedom that leads us from the grave to the water's edge.

The pathway to this freedom is counterintuitive: it requires us to step off our dead-end road and run toward the very One we've been fleeing from.

3. From the Grave to the Water's Edge

The progression in the writing is crucial:

- *"The freedom I was living / Turned out to make me a slave"*
- *"Rather than bringing life to me / It buried me in my own grave"*
- *"He led me down a dead end path / So He could show me His vision"*
- *"It stopped way short of the water of life / And I had to make a decision"*

God doesn't usually intervene the moment we start running. He lets us run. Lets the path we've chosen reveal its true nature. Lets us reach the

dead end.

Not because He's cruel. Because that's when we're finally ready to listen.

As long as we think our path might work, we won't turn around. But when we hit the wall, when the road dead-ends, when we're standing in a grave of our own making—that's when grace becomes not just nice but necessary.

And at that dead end, there's a choice: turn around or stay buried.

The water of life is right there. Close enough to see. Close enough to reach. But there's a gap between the dead-end road and the water's edge. And crossing that gap requires a decision.

Pause and consider: Where has your self-made path led you? What dead end are you facing?

Will we stay on the familiar path, even though it's killing us? Or will we step off into the unknown, trusting that Love will catch us?

4. The Decision: Fleeing or Embracing

"Would I turn around and walk away / Fleeing from the water's edge / Or would I leave my road and run to Him / Embracing His freedom pledge"

This is the hinge moment. The turning point. Everything comes down to this choice.

Grace is offered. The water is there. The invitation is extended. But grace must be received. We have to choose to step toward it.

And here's what's so tender about this moment: God doesn't force us. He invites. He calls. He stands at the water's edge with arms open. But He waits for us to come.

Why? Because love that's forced isn't love. Rescue that's imposed isn't freedom.

God wants relationship, not robots. So He offers grace and waits for our response.

The wayfarer in the story makes the choice: "I stepped off that dead end road / And simply trusted He would save."

Notice the word: simply. Not "I cleaned myself up and then approached." Not "I proved I was worthy and then stepped forward." Simply trusted.

That's all grace requires. Not perfection. Not performance. Just trust.

Trust that God is who He says He is. Trust that grace is real. Trust that the water won't reject you.

5. The Lifting: God's Hand Raises Us

"With each step I took, I felt His hand / Lifting me out of my grave"

This is the miracle of grace. We step toward the water, and God's hand meets us. We take one step of faith, and He carries us the rest of the way.

We don't pull ourselves out of the grave. We can't. We're dead in it.

But when we trust—when we simply turn toward the water and step—God's hand reaches down and lifts us out.

Paul captures this in Ephesians 2:4-5:

"But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!)" — Ephesians 2:4-5 (NLT)

Made us alive. Not "helped us get a little better." Not "gave us a boost." Made us alive.

That's resurrection language. That's dead-to-life language. That's grace language.

You can't resurrect yourself. You can only be resurrected. And that's what God does when you step toward the water. He doesn't just wash you. He raises you.

From death to life. From grave to grace. From wretch to beloved.

6. Addressing Objections: Cheap Grace vs. Costly Grace

Whenever we talk about grace being free, unearned, and given to the undeserving, someone will object: "But doesn't that make grace cheap? Doesn't that give people license to sin?"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer addressed this in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. He distinguished between cheap grace and costly grace.

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship. Grace without transformation. Grace that says, "You're forgiven, so keep living however you want." It's grace as a Get Out of Jail Free card that you pocket and then go back to your old life.

Costly grace is grace that costs God everything—the life of His Son on the cross—and costs us everything too. Not to earn it, but as a response to it. When you truly encounter grace, it doesn't leave you unchanged. It transforms you.

Bonhoeffer writes:

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has." — Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship

The grace we encounter at the water's edge is costly—not in what we pay to receive it, but in what it cost Christ to offer it, and in how completely it transforms us when we truly receive it.

Costly grace says: "You're forgiven, and because of that, you're free to become who you were always meant to be. Not by striving, but by surrendering. Not by performing, but by receiving and then living out of the abundance of what you've received."

The grace extended at the water's edge is costly grace. It cost Jesus His life. And it will cost us our old life—the one built on autonomy and self-rule. But what we gain in exchange is life itself. Real life. Abundant life. Eternal life.

Stories of Scandalous Grace

Want to hear more stories about this kind of grace?

The Prodigal Son: From the Pigpen to the Father's Embrace (Luke 15:11-32)

There's a famous story Jesus told about a younger son who demanded his inheritance early (essentially wishing his father dead), left home, squandered everything in wild living, and ended up in a pigpen, so desperate he's eating pig food.

From that pigpen, he makes a decision:

"I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'" — Luke 15:18-19 (NLT)

He's not expecting grace. He's expecting to be a servant at best. He's rehearsing his speech, his apology, his offer to earn his way back.

But watch what happens:

"So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him." — Luke 15:20 (NLT)

The father doesn't wait for the apology. Doesn't wait for the son to grovel. While the son is still far off, the father runs.

And when the son tries to give his speech, the father cuts him off. He calls for the best robe, a ring, sandals. He throws a party.

This is scandalous grace. The son deserves nothing. He's squandered everything. He's come home smelling like pigs. But the father doesn't care about what he deserves. The father cares about who he is: his son.

Grace isn't based on worthiness. It's based on relationship. And in God's economy, you're a son or daughter not because you've earned it but because He's declared it.

Henri Nouwen, in his profound meditation on this parable, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, writes:

"The father's love is unconditional... There are no 'ifs.' The love of the father is given, not as the reward for effort, but as a pure gift. The younger son did not deserve that love... But the father gives it anyway. The love of the father is free; it is not dependent on any behavior, performance, or result. It simply is." — Henri Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal Son

Nouwen spent hours contemplating Rembrandt's painting of this scene, and he discovered something profound: the father's hands on the son's shoulders aren't just holding—they're blessing. One hand is strong and masculine, the other gentle and feminine. Together they represent the fullness of God's love: both strength and tenderness, justice and mercy, power and compassion.

The son comes home to be a servant. The father makes him a son. That's grace.

The Woman Caught in Adultery: No Condemnation (John 8:1-11)

The religious leaders drag a woman caught in adultery before Jesus. The Law says she should be stoned. They're testing Jesus, trying to trap Him.

Jesus bends down and writes in the dust. Then He says:

"All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" — John 8:7 (NLT)

One by one, the accusers leave. Starting with the oldest—the ones who've lived long enough to know their own sin.

Finally, it's just Jesus and the woman. And Jesus asks:

"Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, 'Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?' 'No, Lord,' she said. And Jesus said, 'Neither do I. Go and sin no more.'" — John 8:10-11 (NLT)

No condemnation. Not "You're forgiven because you promised never to do it again." Not "You're forgiven because you've suffered enough." Just: "Neither do I."

That's grace. Unearned. Undeserved. Freely given.

And notice what follows: "Go and sin no more." Grace doesn't excuse sin—it empowers transformation. It doesn't say, "Keep living however you want." It says, "You're free now. Free from condemnation. Free from the power of sin. So go live like the free person you are."

Zacchaeus: Grace That Seeks the Seeker (Luke 19:1-10)

Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector—a collaborator with Rome, a thief who's grown rich by extorting his own people. He's hated. Despised. Excluded.

But he's curious about Jesus. So he climbs a tree to see Him.

Jesus stops under the tree, looks up, and says:

"Zacchaeus!" he said. "Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today." — Luke 19:5 (NLT)

The crowd grumbles: "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

But Zacchaeus responds to grace with transformation:

"I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!" — Luke 19:8 (NLT)

Jesus didn't demand restitution first. He offered relationship first. And the relationship produced transformation.

That's how grace works. It doesn't wait for us to fix ourselves. It meets us where we are, offers relationship, and then—out of that relationship—transformation flows.

John Ortberg captures this perfectly:

"Grace is the offer of God's ceaseless presence and irrational love. The only thing you have to do is to want to be with Jesus more than you want anything else." — John Ortberg, The Me I Want to Be

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus more than he wanted to maintain his reputation. He climbed a tree—ridiculous for a wealthy tax collector. And Jesus saw him, called him down, and offered relationship. That's grace—meeting us in our ridiculous, desperate seeking and saying, "Come down. I want to be with you."

The Core Scripture Truth

Here's the theological bedrock of everything we're exploring in Ephesians 2:8-9:

Let's unpack this verse phrase by phrase, because it changes everything.

"By grace you have been saved":

Grace is the means. Not effort. Not goodness. Not trying really hard. Grace.

And notice the tense: "have been saved." It's done. Accomplished. Complete. You're not trying to get saved. If you're in Christ, you are saved. Present reality, not future hope.

"Through faith":

Faith is the instrument. The way grace is received. Not works, but trust. Belief. Reliance on God's promise rather than your own ability.

Faith isn't the same as perfection. You don't have to have perfect faith to be saved. You just have to have faith—even mustard-seed-sized faith—in a perfect Savior.

"And this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God":

This is crucial. Both the salvation and the faith are gifts. You can't even take credit for believing. God gives the grace. God gives the faith. You receive.

Why does Paul emphasize this? Because our default mode is to try to contribute something. To earn a little bit. To prove we're worthy. But grace, by definition, can't be earned. The moment you think you've contributed to your salvation, you've moved from grace to works. And works can't save.

"Not by works, so that no one can boast":

If salvation were by works, then the people who did the most works would have bragging rights. They'd be "better Christians" than those who did fewer works.

But in grace, there's no hierarchy. The apostle Paul and the thief on the cross stand before God on the same footing: utterly dependent on grace.

No one can boast. Not about how good they are. Not about how hard they tried. Not about how much they've done for God.

We can only boast in this: Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

Andrew Murray beautifully expresses this:

*"The first link between my soul and Christ is not my goodness but my badness, not my merit but my misery, not my standing but my falling, not my riches but my need." —
Andrew Murray, Abide in Christ*

We don't come to grace because we're good enough. We come because we're desperate enough. And that desperation—that acknowledgment of our wretchedness—is the beginning of transformation.

The Wayfarer Moment

When grace stops being doctrine and becomes your story.

You can know the theology of grace—memorize Ephesians 2:8-9, understand justification by faith, articulate the difference between cheap and costly grace—and still not experience grace.

Because grace isn't just a doctrine. It's an encounter.

The wayfarer moment is when you stop understanding grace in the abstract and start experiencing it in the specific. When it's not just "God loves the world" but "God loves me." Not just "Jesus died for sinners" but "Jesus died for me."

This is what happened in the story from the blog. The writer wasn't learning about grace for the first time. They'd grown up knowing the

truth, been taught the faith, knew the path they should follow.

But they'd trampled on that gift. Traded it for autonomy. Ruled from their own throne. And ended up in a grave of their own making.

The wayfarer moment came when they stood at the dead end of their self-made path and heard the whisper: "Turn around. The water is here. Just trust Me."

And they did. One step. Then another. And with each step, they felt God's hand lifting them out of the grave.

That's when grace stopped being a hymn they sang and became their testimony.

I once was lost but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see.

Not theological theory. Personal history.

Song Integration

The first time I truly understood John Newton's "Amazing Grace," I was standing at a dead end of my own making, and the word "wretch" suddenly stopped being offensive and started being honest. This isn't a song about minor mistakes. This is about moral catastrophe, actively participating in your own destruction, deserving condemnation and receiving grace instead.

To understand this hymn, you need to know who wrote it. John Newton was a slave trader. He commanded ships transporting kidnapped Africans across the Atlantic in horrific conditions. He profited from human suffering on an industrial scale. When a violent storm nearly sank his ship in 1748, Newton cried out to God. That moment began a long transformation—but even after his conversion, he continued in the slave trade for years. Only later, after entering ministry, did he become an active abolitionist, working with William Wilberforce to end the slave trade in Britain. When Newton called

himself a wretch, he wasn't being dramatic. He was being factual.

Modern Christianity has a complicated relationship with "wretch." Some hymnals have softened it: "that saved and strengthened me" or "that saved a soul like me." But the softening misses the point entirely. Grace only makes sense if we're honest about what we're being saved from. If we're basically good people who just need a little help, grace isn't amazing—it's redundant. But if we're wretches—so far gone we can't save ourselves, having actively participated in evil—then grace isn't just nice. It's necessary. It's scandalous. It's amazing.

The word "wretch" isn't about self-loathing. It's about honest assessment. Romans 3:23 doesn't say "all have stumbled a little"—it says "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." All. Every single one. We're all wretches in need of grace. And that's good news. Because if grace is only for the basically good, most of us are disqualified. But if grace is for wretches, we all qualify.

The original writing from my blog captures the journey: "I traded it in for my version of freedom / Ruling others from my own throne." This is the Genesis 3 temptation: "You will be like God"—the seductive belief that we can define reality for ourselves, that autonomy is the highest good. So I took the gifts I'd been given and threw them away for my version of freedom. And my version of freedom turned out to be slavery. "The freedom I was living / Turned out to make me a slave / Rather than bringing life to me / It buried me in my own grave."

Sometimes God lets us exhaust our own options. He doesn't intervene the moment we start running. He lets the path we've chosen reveal its true nature. He lets us hit the dead end. Not because He's cruel, but because that's when we're finally ready to listen. The dead-end path isn't punishment. It's mercy.

"I stepped off that dead end road / And simply trusted He would save / With each step I took, I felt His hand / Lifting me out of my grave." *Simply trusted*. Not "I cleaned myself up and then approached." Just trust. That's all grace requires. Not perfection, not performance. And

the miracle: with each step toward the water, I felt His hand. Not after I arrived. *With each step.* He met me in the moving. Grace active, present, immediate.

The three verses I recorded trace the journey. Verse 1: The Rescue—"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me." All passive voice—things done *to* me, not *by* me. Grace is the actor. I'm the recipient. Verse 2: The Fear and Relief—grace teaches holy fear (appropriate awe) and relieves fear (terror of condemnation). Both. Verse 3: The Testimony—"Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far / And grace will lead me home." Looking back: I didn't survive through my own strength. Looking forward: grace *will* lead me home. Certainty.

"Amazing Grace" has endured for centuries because we're all wretches, and we all need grace. The scandal isn't just that grace saved me once. The scandal is that grace keeps saving me—daily, hourly, every time I turn from the dead-end path and move toward the water's edge.

Key Takeaways

- **Grace is for wretches, not nice people.** If you deserved it, it wouldn't be grace—it would be payment. The scandal is that God loves you while you're still a mess, not after you clean up.
- **You traded true freedom for false freedom.** Autonomy isn't liberty—it's slavery in disguise. Real freedom comes through surrender to the One who died to set you free.
- **Grace is costly, not cheap.** It cost Christ His life and will cost you your old life built on self-rule. But what you gain is life itself—abundant, eternal, real.
- **Your dead-end road is grace's invitation.** When your self-made path stops short of living water, that's not failure—it's

God showing you where the real source is. Step off and run toward it.

Reflections for the Road

These questions aren't homework. They're invitations to encounter grace personally.

Questions for the Journey:

1. Where are you trading true freedom for false freedom?

What self-made throne are you sitting on? Where are you trying to write your own plan instead of following what's true? Be specific. Name it. Because you can't step off a path you won't admit you're on.

2. What dead-end road has life let you travel to show you its true nature?

Sometimes we have to exhaust our own options before we're ready to receive what's offered. Where has your path dead-ended? And what is being shown to you from that vantage point?

3. What's keeping you from stepping toward the water's edge?

Is it shame? The belief that you've gone too far? The fear that grace has limits and you've exceeded them? Name the obstacle. Bring it into the light. Because shame loses its power when it's spoken aloud.

4. Read Luke 15:11-32 slowly. Put yourself in the prodigal's place. What would it feel like to have the Father run toward you?

Don't rush this. Imagine standing far off, still in your filth, rehearsing your apology. And then imagine seeing the Father—not waiting sternly at the door, but running toward you with arms open. What would that do to your heart?

Practice: Writing Your Grace Story

Grace becomes real when it becomes personal. When it's not just doctrine but story.

Take some time—unhurried time—and write your own grace story. Not a theological essay. A story.

Answer these prompts:

- Where was I when grace found me?
- What dead-end road had I traveled?
- What did I think about myself? About God? About my worthiness to be loved?
- When did I hear the invitation to turn toward the water's edge?
- What did stepping toward grace feel like?
- How has grace lifted me from my grave?

Don't worry about making it sound polished or spiritual. Write it honestly. Write it in your own voice. Write it as your testimony.

And then, if possible, share it with someone. Not to impress them. Just to declare it. To say out loud: This is what grace did for me.

Because when grace stops being doctrine and becomes your story, it changes everything.

Closing Image

You're standing in the water now. Not all the way in yet—just ankle-deep. But you're in.

And the water is exactly what was promised. Living. Flowing. Clean.

The mud from the swamp is starting to wash away. Not all at once, but gradually. With each step deeper, more of it lifts off and is carried downstream.

You look down at your feet and you can see them clearly for the first time in years. The water is so clear you can see straight to the bottom. And you realize: This is what I've been longing for. Not just to be clean, but to be seen—truly seen—and loved anyway.

Take a breath.

You cup water in your hands and pour it over your arms. The mud runs off in brown streams. Underneath: skin. Your actual skin. You'd almost forgotten what it looked like.

You're still a mess. You're still covered in swamp residue. But you're also being washed. Both are true at the same time.

And from somewhere deep inside—deeper than the shame, deeper than the fear, deeper than the old lies—you hear it rising up. Your voice. Singing.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see.

It's not just a hymn anymore. It's your story.

You're at the water's edge. You've stepped in. And grace is washing you clean.

One step at a time. One breath at a time. One grace-filled moment at a time.

You're being made new. And it's only just beginning.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 8)

MOVEMENT 2: AT THE WATER'S EDGE (The Turning)

Chapter 8: Dig a Little Deeper

"They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream." — Jeremiah 17:8

Dig a Little Deeper

Listen at: <http://go.skylertthomas.com/i0kY88>



Scan to listen: Dig a Little Deeper

An Invitation to Go Deeper

You've journeyed through seven chapters now. You've named the swamp, cried out, decided, died to the old, stepped into living water, found shelter in grace, and received what you don't deserve.

You've been washed. The surface mud is gone. You look better. Smell better. Function better.

But now I need to ask you something uncomfortable:

Are you willing to let grace go deeper than the surface?

Because here's what I've learned: Getting clean isn't the same as getting healed.

It's like the sign in the doctor's office: "Do you want to be right, or do you want to be well?"

You can wash off the mud and still carry the wounds underneath. You can look healed on the outside while the infection still festers inside. You can function well while the scar tissue hides the pain you've never actually dealt with.

Grace doesn't just want to clean you up. Grace wants to heal you from the inside out. And that requires digging—opening wounds you've spent years protecting, feeling pain you've been numbing, facing truths you've been avoiding.

Here's the hard truth nobody tells you upfront: You can't heal what you won't feel. And you can't feel what you keep buried.

This chapter is about excavation. About going beneath the surface to the deep places where real transformation happens.

And I'm not going to lie to you—it's terrifying. It's going to hurt. You're going to want to stop halfway through and just settle for looking clean on the outside.

But if you're willing—if you can say, even with fear, "God, I don't want to just look healed, I want to BE healed. Dig as deep as You need

to"—then what comes next will transform you from the inside out.

Are you ready to go deeper? To let grace excavate not just your behavior but your heart? To dig through the scar tissue until you hit bedrock truth?

If yes, take a breath and keep reading.

This is where transformation stops being surface-level and starts becoming soul-level.

There's a difference between clean and healed.

You can wash off the surface mud—the visible stains, the obvious filth, the stuff everyone can see. The water does that quickly. You step in. The dirt rinses away. You look clean.

But underneath? That's where the real work begins.

Underneath the surface are the wounds you've carried for years. The scar tissue that formed over the original pain. The coping mechanisms you developed to survive. The defense strategies that became so automatic you forgot you were using them. The ways of numbing, avoiding, performing, pretending that protected you from feeling the full weight of what happened.

The surface dirt washes away easily. The scar tissue? That requires excavation.

This chapter is about the moment you realize: if you want real healing—not just cleaning, but healing—you're going to have to go deeper.

You're going to have to dig.

Digging is terrifying. Underneath the scar tissue is the original wound. The one you've been protecting for years. The one that still hurts when you accidentally brush against it in the middle of the night.

To heal that wound, you have to open it again. You have to cut through the scar tissue, drain the toxins, let air and light reach the infection that's been festering in the dark.

You can't numb this. Real healing requires you to feel. To face. To dig.

The writing that follows came from my season of excavation. When I discovered that time doesn't heal all wounds—it just buries them deeper. The only way to true healing was through the pain I'd been avoiding for years.

Grace doesn't just wash the surface. Grace goes deep. All the way down to the bedrock truth of who you are beneath the wounds, beneath the scars, beneath the lies you've believed about yourself.

But you have to let it.

You have to dig.

Key Themes

1. The Depths of Grace: How Wide, How Long, How High, How Deep

The Apostle Paul prays one of the most beautiful prayers in Scripture in Ephesians 3:

"May you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God." — Ephesians 3:18-19 (NLT)

How wide? Wide enough to reach every person, every nation, every generation. No one is outside the reach of this love.

How long? Long enough to span eternity. From before the foundation of the world to forever. This love has no beginning and no end.

How high? High enough to lift us from the lowest pit to the highest heights. From death to life. From slave to heir.

How deep? This is where it gets personal. Deep enough to reach the deepest wound, the darkest shame, the most hidden brokenness.

Grace doesn't skim the surface. It goes all the way down. Down to the root. Down to the original pain. Down to the place you've been protecting for years because you're terrified that if anyone—including God—sees it, you'll be rejected.

But grace isn't afraid of your depth.

Grace dives. Grace excavates.

Grace says: "Show me the wound. I know how to heal it."

Philip Yancey writes:

"Grace, like water, flows to the lowest part. The gospel's good news is that God loves us not because of our infinite worth, but in spite of our infinite unworthiness." — Philip Yancey, The Jesus I Never Knew

Grace doesn't wait at the surface for us to climb up. It descends—all the way down to the lowest, darkest, most wounded places.

That's where grace does its deepest work.

2. Spiritual Formation as Excavation, Not Construction

We tend to think of spiritual growth as building something. Adding disciplines. Improving behavior. Constructing a better version of ourselves.

But that's not how it works.

Spiritual formation is more like archaeology than architecture. Excavation, not construction.

You're not building a new self from scratch. You're uncovering your true self—the image of the Divine that's been buried under layers of wounds, lies, and false beliefs.

Dallas Willard writes in *Renovation of the Heart*:

"Actions are not impostions on who we are, but are expressions of who we are. They come out of our heart and the inner realities it supervises and interacts with." — Dallas Willard, Renovation of the Heart

Who you are at the core—created in love's image, beloved, chosen, redeemed—is already true. But it's buried. Hidden under layers of pain and protection.

Digging deeper means removing what doesn't belong so the truth can emerge.

Think of a sculptor chipping away marble to reveal the statue that's been there all along. The sculptor doesn't create the statue from nothing. The statue is already in the marble. The work is removing everything that isn't the statue.

That's what digging deeper does. It removes the false beliefs, the protective layers, the scar tissue—not to create something new, but to reveal what's always been true underneath.

Thomas Merton understood this deeply:

"There is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace, and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him." — Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain

Excavation isn't just about removing what's false—it's about uncovering who we truly are. The two discoveries are one journey.

3. Digging Through the Layers

The journey inward follows a pattern. Not everyone goes through these layers in the same order, but most of us encounter them:

Layer 1: Performance

On the surface, we perform. We present the version of ourselves we think will be acceptable. We wear masks. Manage impressions. Work hard to look good, sound good, appear to have it together.

This is exhausting. Performance is never finished. You can never rest. Always have to be "on."

Layer 2: Shame

Underneath performance is shame. The voice that says: "If they really knew me, they'd reject me. If they saw the real me—messy, broken, failing—they'd turn away."

Shame is what drives performance. We perform because we're ashamed of what we think people will see if we stop performing.

Layer 3: Wounds

Underneath shame are the wounds. The things that happened to us. The ways we were hurt, betrayed, abandoned, abused. The traumas, large and small, that marked us.

Wounds aren't our fault. They're what was done to us. But they shape us. They create patterns of response—fight, flight, freeze, fawn—that become so automatic we don't realize we're doing them.

Layer 4: False Beliefs

Underneath the wounds are the false beliefs. The conclusions we drew from the wounds about ourselves, about others, about reality.

"I'm not good enough."

"Every statement is a criticism."

"Responses are always taken the wrong way."

"I have to be intense or I won't be taken seriously."

"If I'm not perfect, I'll be abandoned."

These beliefs formed in moments of pain. And they've been running our lives ever since.

What false beliefs have you been living under? What lies sound like truth because you've heard them so long?

Layer 5: Bedrock Truth

All the way down, beneath all the layers, is the bedrock truth:

You are loved. You are worthy. You are enough. You are beloved.

This truth was true before the wounds. It remained true through the wounds. And it's true now, underneath all the layers.

Digging deeper means excavating through performance, shame, wounds, and false beliefs until you hit bedrock. Until you touch the truth of who you actually are.

4. Finding Treasure Buried in the Depths

Jesus tells a parable in Matthew 13:

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field." — Matthew 13:44 (NLT)

The treasure is there. Already in the field. The work isn't creating the treasure—it's finding it.

Once you find it, you'll give up everything to possess it. Not out of obligation. Out of joy.

That's what digging deeper does. It helps you find the treasure that's been there all along—your true self, your real identity, the image of love in you—and once you find it, you'll gladly let go of everything else.

The performance? Exhausting. Let it go.

The shame? A lie. Let it go.

The false beliefs? Not bedrock. Let them go.

What remains is who you've always been, underneath:

Beloved.

Eugene Peterson writes:

"The minute we begin moving away from Scripture to discover the will of God, we enter the world of guesswork and magic and manipulation. The Bible is God's revelation to us, revealing who God is and who we are and what we are called to do." — Eugene Peterson, A Long Obedience in the Same Direction

Digging deeper means going back to bedrock truth—not our opinions, not our feelings, but what reality reveals about who we are. That's the treasure buried in the field.

5. Surface Religion vs. Deep Transformation

Jesus had no patience for surface religion. He called out the religious leaders repeatedly for their performance—they looked good on the outside, rotten inside.

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too." — Matthew 23:25-26 (NLT)

Surface religion focuses on the outside: behavior, appearance, performance. It's about looking good to others.

Deep transformation focuses on the inside: the heart, the motives, the beliefs that drive behavior.

You can clean up your behavior without touching your heart. You can look like a "good person" on the outside while still being driven by shame, fear, and false beliefs inside.

Digging deeper means going to the heart. Letting Love excavate not just your actions but your affections. Not just your habits but your desires.

Paul captures this in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

"So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image." — 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NLT)

Transformation. Not behavior modification. Not surface cleaning. Transformation from the inside out.

And it comes not from our striving but from beholding. From contemplating Love's glory with unveiled faces—no masks, no performance, just face-to-face encounter with what's Real.

When we dig deep enough to remove the veils, the transformation happens. Not because we're trying harder. Because we're seeing more clearly.

A.W. Tozer captures this beautifully:

"What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us... Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God." — A.W. Tozer, The Knowledge of the Holy

Surface religion settles for low thoughts—a manageable concept that confirms our preferences. Deep transformation requires digging down to encounter what's truly Real—infinite, holy, transcendent, and yet intimately near. When we behold rightly, we cannot remain unchanged.

Stories of Digging Deeper

Want to hear some ancient stories about this kind of excavation?

Isaac Re-Digging the Wells (Genesis 26:18)

Picture the scene: Isaac is living in the Negev, the dry southern desert where his father Abraham once dwelt. Water is life here—without wells, there's no survival. No water for people, no water for flocks, no way to stay in the land.

Abraham had done the hard work years before. He'd dug deep wells, found water, established a life. But after Abraham died, enemies came and filled in every single well. They hauled dirt and rocks, stopped up the openings, buried the sources. It was sabotage—an attempt to drive Isaac out, to reclaim the land, to erase Abraham's legacy.

Isaac could have left. Could have said, "The wells are gone. The work is undone. I'll start somewhere else."

But he didn't. The text says:

"He reopened the wells his father had dug, which the Philistines had filled in after Abraham's death. Isaac also restored the names Abraham had given them." — Genesis 26:18 (NLT)

Isaac had to dig again. Shovel by shovel, stone by stone, removing the fill, excavating through layers of debris until he hit the original well shaft. The wells had been there. His father had done the work. Water had flowed. But over time, they'd been deliberately stopped up, buried,

hidden.

Now Isaac had to re-dig them. Hard, sweaty, exhausting work. Digging through sabotage. Excavating through enemy interference. Going back to what was true from the beginning.

This is the work of excavation. The well was dug. Your true identity was established. The truth about you was set. The well is there.

But over the years, enemies have filled it in. Trauma, lies, shame, false beliefs—they've stopped up the well.

Digging deeper means re-opening the wells. Going back to what was true from the beginning. Excavating through all the fill until you hit water again.

And when you do, the water is still there.

Still living. Still life-giving.

Deep Calls to Deep (Psalm 42:7)

The psalmist writes:

"I hear the tumult of the raging seas as your waves and surging tides sweep over me." — Psalm 42:7 (NLT)

There's a depth in Reality that calls to the depth in you. Not the surface you. Not the performed you. The real you. The deep you.

Love doesn't want your mask. It wants your heart. Doesn't want your performance. Wants your presence.

The only way to give access to your depth is to dig. To go below the surface. To cut through the scar tissue and invite healing into the wound.

Deep calls to deep. The depth of Love is reaching for the depth of your need.

When they meet, healing happens.

Timothy Keller writes:

"We never become safe from temptation. We become holy not by avoiding sin, but by loving God. When we flee to God in our fear and brokenness, we find that He can use even our darkest moments to draw us deeper into His love."
— Timothy Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*

The deep waters aren't a place to avoid—they're the place where we encounter Love most profoundly. When we stop running from our depths and instead invite healing into them, transformation becomes possible.

The Woman at the Well Going Deeper (John 4)

It's noon—the hottest part of the day. No one comes to the well at noon if they can help it. You come in the morning or evening when it's cooler, when the other women are there, when drawing water becomes a social event.

But this woman comes at noon. Alone. Because she can't face the other women. Can't bear the stares, the whispers, the judgment. Five marriages. Five. And the man she's with now isn't even her husband. Everyone knows. Everyone talks.

So she comes when no one else is there.

Except today, there's a Jewish man sitting by the well. A Jew. In Samaria. Jews don't come here. And they definitely don't talk to Samaritan women.

But He does. "Give me a drink."

The conversation starts surface-level, defensive:

Woman: "You're a Jew. I'm a Samaritan. Why are you even talking to me?"

Jesus could have stayed at that level—cultural barriers, religious differences, safe territory. But He goes deeper:

Jesus: "If you knew who was asking, you'd ask me for living water."

Woman: "You don't have a bucket. Where's this water coming from?"

Still surface. Still literal. Still protected. But Jesus goes deeper:

Jesus: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst."

Woman: "Sir, give me this water!"

Getting closer. She's starting to want something. But Jesus goes even deeper:

Jesus: "Go call your husband."

There it is. The question she dreads. The reality she can't escape.

Woman: "I don't have a husband."

She states it simply. Flatly. Hoping that ends it.

Jesus: "You're right. You've had five husbands, and the man you're with now isn't your husband."

Now we're at the wound. The shame. The thing she came at noon to avoid facing. The thing everyone in town whispers about. The reason she's alone.

And Jesus—He doesn't condemn her. Doesn't lecture her. Doesn't pull back in disgust. He just sees her. Fully. Knows her completely. And still offers her living water.

From this depth—the place of wound and shame and honesty—she encounters Jesus as the Messiah. And everything changes. She leaves her water jar behind and runs back to town, no longer hiding, and tells everyone: "Come see a man who told me everything I ever did!"

That's what happens when we let truth go deep. Transformation flows from depth, not surface.

The Core Scripture Truth

Here's the promise that makes digging possible:

*"If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me." —
Jeremiah 29:13 (NLT)*

God isn't hiding from you. He's not playing games, making Himself difficult to find so only the spiritually elite can reach Him.

But He is deep. And finding Him requires going deep.

"With all your heart." Not with half. Not with the surface layer. With all of it. The whole thing. The wounds and the shame and the false beliefs and the raw, unfiltered need.

When you seek Him there—in the depths, not just the shallows—you find Him. And when you find Him, you discover He's been there all along. In the deep. Waiting for you to stop protecting yourself long enough to let Him in.

This isn't about earning presence by being vulnerable enough. It's about discovering that Love's presence is already there, in the depths, and the work is removing the barriers we've erected to keep it (and everyone else) out.

The Wayfarer Moment

Grace on the surface is wonderful. Grace in the depths is life-changing.

You can experience grace on the surface. You can know you're forgiven. You can feel the relief of being washed. You can taste the

living water.

But if you never dig deeper—if you stay in the shallows, protecting the depths—you'll miss the fullness of what grace offers.

Because grace doesn't just want to clean you. Grace wants to heal you. And healing requires depth.

The wayfarer moment in this chapter is the moment you decide:

I'm not going to keep protecting this wound. I'm not going to keep numbing this pain. I'm not going to keep living with scar tissue that fools me into thinking I'm healed when I'm just covered up.

I'm going to dig. Open the wound. Let it drain. I'm going to invite healing into the deepest, most protected places and trust that grace is sufficient even there.

Take a breath.

This is terrifying. Because what if the wound is too deep? What if the pain is too much? What if you open it and you can't survive it?

But here's the promise: you don't dig alone. Love is the excavator. It has the skill to go deep without destroying you. It knows exactly how deep to dig and exactly how to heal what it uncovers.

Proverbs 20:5 says:

"Though good advice lies deep within the heart, a person with understanding will draw it out." — Proverbs 20:5 (NLT)

God has the insight. He knows how to draw out what's buried. And when He does, transformation happens. Not surface transformation. Deep, lasting, bedrock transformation.

Song Integration

"Time heals all wounds"—it sounds like truth until you discover something painful: time doesn't heal wounds. Time just buries them deeper under layers of scar tissue until we've convinced ourselves we're fine when we're actually just numb.

"Dig a Little Deeper" emerged from that season of excavation—when I learned you can't heal what you won't feel, and you can't feel what you keep buried.

My counselor, Dr. Petit, explained it with devastating clarity: "It's been said time heals all wounds...yet for the untreated or poorly treated wound, time will infect then scar. For the unset or improperly set bone, time will knit then lame." This is medically accurate. A wound left untreated doesn't heal—it becomes infected and forms scar tissue over the infection. A broken bone left unset knits back together in the wrong position, leaving you permanently lame.

The same is true spiritually and emotionally. Time doesn't heal soul wounds. Proper treatment does. And proper treatment requires digging—opening the wound, draining the infection, then giving time as the servant of healing rather than as the supposed healer itself. For years, I'd been functioning around my wounds rather than healing them. I looked healed. I sounded healed. But I was just well-rehearsed at hiding.

The turning point came when my counselor helped me distinguish between the "reactive self" and the "real self." After moments when I'd reacted poorly, he would ask: "What specifically was reactive? Once that becomes clear, we can explore why that's a trigger." That question opened the door to excavation. Triggers aren't random. They're connected to wounds. To disarm the trigger, you have to heal the wound. But to heal the wound, you have to open it.

This terrified me. The wound was covered, scarred over. Opening it meant feeling the original pain again. Meant acknowledging how deep it went. Meant admitting I wasn't as healed as I'd been pretending to be.

The song begins by calling out the platitude: "They say that time can heal what's broke, but it just whispers empty hope." Time as healer is an empty promise. The pre-chorus captures the breaking point: "I tried to fake it 'til I made it, but I can't outrun what's breaking me." The decision to stop running and start digging.

The chorus is theologically crucial: "So I'm gonna dig a little deeper, down where the hurting hides. Open the scar so grace can reach, the pain that's buried deep inside." We don't dig just to feel the pain—we dig so grace can reach what's been inaccessible. As long as the wound is buried under scar tissue, grace can't touch it. But when we expose it to light and truth, grace can do its healing work. "It's gonna hurt, I know it will, and healing starts when I finally feel."

Verse two introduces the promise that makes excavation possible: "Truth won't run, it stands its ground, and mercy whispers through the sound: 'You're not alone, I'm still right here, even in your tears.'" Presence in the pain. God doesn't wait until we're healed to show up. He meets us in the mess, in the tears, in the raw exposed wound. Not after them, not despite them, but in them.

The bridge confesses dependence: "I can't do this on my own, but I was never meant to be alone." We can't heal ourselves. We need divine help and human help—counselors, friends, community. "You reach into the mess I've made, and call my broken heart by name." God doesn't wait for us to clean up before reaching in. He reaches into the chaos and calls our hearts by name—identity based not on our wounds but on whose we are.

The final chorus testifies: "So I dig a little deeper, You meet me in the pain. You wash my wounds with holy light, and I am whole again. It hurts, but I can feel again." The paradox of healing: the pain doesn't disappear, but it's no longer the only reality. God's presence in the pain is also real. And presence transforms pain from something that destroys to something that refines.

Since writing this song, excavation has become a rhythm, not a one-time event. But I'm no longer afraid of the digging. The deeper I go, the more grace I find. Time doesn't heal all wounds. But grace—when we're willing to dig deep enough to let it reach us—heals what time cannot.

Lyrics: Dig a Little Deeper

Verse 1

They say that time can heal what's broke,
But it just whispers empty hope.
I've waited long, I've played the game,
But every day still feels the same.
The echoes say, "Just give it time,"
But time's been cruel to heart and mind.
If healing comes with every day,
Why do I still feel this way?

Pre-Chorus

I tried to fake it 'til I made it,
But I can't outrun what's breaking me.

Chorus

So I'm gonna dig a little deeper,
Down where the hurting hides.
Open the scar so grace can reach,

The pain that's buried deep inside.
It's gonna hurt, I know it will,
And healing starts when I finally feel.
I'm gonna dig, dig a little deeper,
'Til I find my soul.

Verse 2

The night comes calling like before,
I see those shadows on my door.
Every memory wakes again,
I feel the weight I can't defend.
Truth won't run, it stands its ground,
And mercy whispers through the sound:
"You're not alone, I'm still right here,
Even in your tears."

Pre-Chorus

I've tried to numb it, tried to drown it,
But grace keeps reaching down for me.

Chorus

So I'm gonna dig a little deeper,
Down where the hurting hides.
Open the scar so grace can reach,
The pain that's buried deep inside.

It's gonna hurt, I know it will,
And healing starts when I finally feel.
I'm gonna dig, dig a little deeper,
'Til I find my soul.

Verse 3 (The Turning Point)

Morning breaks, the light comes in,
A softer voice beneath my skin.
The chains I wore begin to slide,
As mercy breathes me back to life.
I feel Your love in every breath,
A quiet peace where fear once slept.
I'm not the same, I'm waking new,
The pain is real — but so are You.

Bridge

I can't do this on my own,
But I was never meant to be alone.
You reach into the mess I've made,
And call my broken heart by name.
You say, "Come and drink from the well that won't run dry."
And for the first time, I believe — I'm alive.

Final Chorus

So I dig a little deeper,
You meet me in the pain.
You wash my wounds with holy light,
And I am whole again.
It hurts, but I can feel again,
I can laugh, I can cry again.
'Cause I dug, I dug a little deeper,
And I found You there within.

Key Takeaways

- **Time doesn't heal wounds—proper treatment does.** Scars can fool you into thinking you're healed when you're just covered up. Real healing requires excavation, not just waiting.
- **You can't heal what you won't feel.** To heal deep wounds, you must cut through scar tissue, open the pain, drain the infection, and let grace reach what's been buried.
- **Transformation is excavation, not construction.** You're not building a new self—you're uncovering your true self by removing layers of wounds, shame, and false beliefs until you hit bedrock truth.
- **The deepest truth is your belovedness.** Beneath all the layers—performance, shame, wounds, lies—is the unchanging reality: you are loved, worthy, and enough because God says so.

Reflections for the Road

These aren't questions to answer quickly. They're invitations to dig.

Questions for the Journey:

1. What scar tissue are you carrying that's masking as healing?

Where have you learned to function around a wound without actually healing it? Where are you telling yourself "I'm fine" when really you're just numb?

2. What would it look like to dig a little deeper in your relationship with God?

Are you keeping Him at the surface level? Sharing edited versions of yourself? What would it take to invite Him into the depths—the wounds, the shame, the false beliefs?

3. Who are the safe people in your life who can help you dig?

You can't do this alone. Who can you trust to sit with you in the pain without trying to fix it too quickly? If you don't have anyone, who could you ask God to bring into your life?

4. Read Psalm 42 slowly. What is the "deep" that's calling to the "deep" in you right now?

Don't rush past this. Let the imagery sink in. Waterfalls. Waves. Depths. What is Love inviting you into? What is it calling out of you?

Practice: Excavation Journaling

This is hard work. Don't rush it. Set aside unhurried time—maybe a whole afternoon or evening. Find a quiet place where you won't be interrupted.

Bring your journal. And pray this prayer:

"God, I invite You to excavate. Show me the layers I've been living under. Help me dig through performance, shame, wounds, and false beliefs until I hit bedrock truth. I trust that Your grace is deep enough to reach all the way down. Give me courage to not turn away from what You uncover. And help me know I'm not alone in this. Amen."

Then work through these layers, one at a time:

Layer 1: Performance

- How do I perform for others? What version of myself do I present?
- What am I afraid people will see if I stop performing?

Layer 2: Shame

- What do I believe about myself that I'm ashamed of?
- Complete this sentence: "If people really knew _____ about me, they would _____."

Layer 3: Wounds

- What are the significant wounds I carry? (Name them. Be specific.)
- How have these wounds shaped the way I relate to God, to others, to myself?

Layer 4: False Beliefs

- What conclusions did I draw from my wounds?
- What lies do I believe about my worth, my identity, my belovedness?

Layer 5: Bedrock Truth

- Beneath all the layers, what is the truth God speaks over me?

- What does Scripture say about my identity?

Write honestly. Don't edit. Don't make it sound spiritual. Just dig.

And when you hit bedrock—when you uncover the truth underneath all the layers—receive it. Let it sink in. Let it be the foundation you build on.

Closing Image

You're in the water now, and it's deeper than before. Not ankle-deep anymore. Waist-deep. The current is stronger here, pulling at you, but also holding you.

And you're doing something you've never done before: you're digging. Not on dry land where you can control the excavation. In the water. Letting the current carry away what you unearth.

You dig through performance—the mask you've worn for so long it feels like your face. You lift it off and hand it to the current. It floats away downstream.

You dig through shame—the voice that's been screaming "you're not enough" for years. You name it as a lie, and the water washes it away.

You dig through the wounds—the places where you were hurt, betrayed, abandoned. You open them to the light and air, and you feel the sting. But you also feel the water, clean and living, flowing into the wound. Washing out the infection. Beginning to heal what's been festering in the dark.

You dig through the false beliefs—"I'm broken beyond repair," "I'm too much," "I'm not enough," "If they really knew me, they'd leave"—and as each one surfaces, you hold it up to the light. And in the light, you see it for what it is: a lie. Not bedrock. Not truth. Just debris.

And finally—finally—you hit bedrock.

Solid. Unshakeable. True.

Take a breath.

You are loved. You are worthy. You are enough. You are beloved. Not because of what you do. Because of who you are. Who you've always been, underneath.

The water is deeper here. But you're not drowning. You're standing. On bedrock. And the current that once felt threatening now feels like an embrace.

You've dug a little deeper. And what you found—what was there all along—is grace. Deep, abiding, bedrock grace.

Great is His faithfulness. New every morning. Deep enough to reach the deepest wound. Strong enough to carry you through the healing.

You're not done digging. There's always more to uncover. Always deeper to go.

But you're not afraid anymore. Because you know now: the deeper you dig, the more grace you find.

And grace, you're discovering, has no bottom.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Movement 3)

MOVEMENT 3: UNFORCED RHYTHMS OF LIFE (The Transformation)

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."
— Matthew 11:28-30 (The Message)

The crisis is over. The rescue has happened. The water has washed you clean.

But now what?

Most of us assume that once we're out of the swamp and through the water's edge, we've arrived. Crisis averted. Problem solved. Time to get back to normal life.

But here's what we discover: there is no going back to normal. Because "normal" was the life that led us to the swamp in the first place.

What we need isn't a return to the old patterns. We need new rhythms entirely. Rhythms that don't produce swamps. Rhythms that sustain life instead of draining it. Rhythms that flow naturally from grace instead of grinding against it.

Unforced rhythms.

Not the frenetic pace of performance. Not the exhausting treadmill of religious striving. Not the constant pressure to prove, produce, and

perform.

Rhythms. Natural. Sustainable. Life-giving.

The kind that fit with how you were actually made to live.

Here's the hard truth: Most of us have been in survival mode so long, we've forgotten there's another way to live.

Survival is getting through. Transformation is growing into.

Survival is crisis management. Transformation is intentional cultivation.

Survival asks, "How do I make it through today?" Transformation asks, "What kind of life am I building?"

In the swamp, survival was the only option. You were drowning—just trying to breathe, trying to keep your head above water, trying to make it one more day without completely falling apart.

At the water's edge, you moved from drowning to breathing. From desperation to hope. From death to life. But you were still focused on immediate needs—getting clean, finding healing, experiencing rescue.

But this? This is different.

This is learning to live beyond crisis. To build a life that doesn't just react to emergencies but actually grows toward something. To develop rhythms that sustain you not just in the hard seasons, but in every season.

This is where transformation happens. Not in the dramatic moment of crisis or the pivotal encounter at the shoreline, but in the steady, daily rhythm of learning to walk with God.

You've left the swamp. You've been washed at the water's edge. Now you're learning what it means to live—really live—in the unforced rhythms of grace.

And this is where everything changes. Not all at once. But day by day.
Breath by breath. Step by step.

The Journey Into Rhythm:

Chapter 9: Unforced Rhythms of Grace - The shift from frenzy to rhythm, from performance to presence. What does it mean to work from rest instead of toward it? To build a sustainable spiritual life that doesn't burn out because it was never built on hype in the first place? This is about manna—daily bread, daily grace. About discovering that grace provides the stable foundation beneath life's natural fluctuations.

Mindful Bliss of Grace

Chapter 10: Deep Roots, Strong Growth - Like a tree planted by streams of water, transformation happens underground before it's visible above the surface. This is the hidden work of spiritual formation—putting to death what doesn't belong (pride, reactivity, isolation, bitterness) and cultivating what does (humility, responsiveness, connection, forgiveness). Deep roots don't guarantee constant productivity, but they do guarantee sustainable fruitfulness over time.

I Will Trust You Lord

Chapter 11: Redemption's Story - Your story isn't separate from the larger story—it's woven into it. From creation through fall through redemption toward restoration. The pain has purpose. The waiting has meaning. The struggle isn't random. Every chapter of your life, even the broken ones, fits into the narrative of grace.

Redemption Story

Chapter 12: Nothing is Wasted - In grace's economy, nothing is wasted. Not "almost nothing." Nothing. Every tear, every failure, every lost year, every broken relationship. This is the scandalous promise that what seems irredeemable can be redeemed. Abraham on Mount Moriah. Joseph from pit to palace. Your timeline viewed

through the lens of grace.

Nothing is Wasted

Chapter 13: Devil's On The Run - There's a fundamental shift that happens when you stop fighting for victory and start fighting from victory. Jesus didn't just survive the enemy's attack—He disarmed him, made a public spectacle of him, triumphed over every power of darkness. You learn to fight from rest instead of from fear, to resist from confidence instead of from desperation.

Devil's On The Run

Chapter 14: Living in the Moment - Most of us live everywhere except the present moment. Replaying yesterday's conversations. Rehearsing tomorrow's scenarios. Carrying the weight of past mistakes and borrowing future worries. This is about learning to be present—to fix your eyes on what's Real instead of on what was or what might be. To trust that this moment, with sufficient grace, is enough.

This Moment is Enough

These six chapters don't offer a program to complete. They offer a way to walk. A rhythm to learn. A life to live.

Not perfectly. Not without stumbling. But with a new kind of stability. Because the roots are going deep. The rhythms are becoming established. The transformation is happening—not in dramatic crisis moments, but in the steady, daily choosing to walk with grace instead of against it.

Pause and consider: What would it mean to stop surviving and start thriving? To stop reacting and start cultivating? To stop grinding and start resting?

The swamp taught you honesty. The water's edge taught you grace. Now the rhythm teaches you sustainability.

This is where faith becomes a way of life instead of a series of desperate rescues. Where spiritual life stops being exhausting and starts being life-giving. Where you discover that grace isn't just the emergency intervention—it's the daily bread. The morning-by-morning manna. The unforced way of living that doesn't burn out.

You've made it through the swamp. You've stepped into the water. Now you're discovering what it means to let grace carry you—to live in the rhythms you were designed for all along.

Welcome to the unforced rhythms of grace.

This is where transformation happens.

Entering This Movement

You're standing in a different place now than when you started this book.

Look back for a moment. Not with regret or nostalgia, but with recognition:

Movement 1: The Swamp - You learned to be honest. You named where you were. You cried out for help. You made the decision to accept rescue. You let something die. That wasn't easy. But it was necessary.

Movement 2: The Water's Edge - You encountered grace. You were washed. You discovered shadow and shelter. You received amazing grace. You dug deeper. You learned that grace is scandalous, relentless, sufficient. That wasn't comfortable. But it was transforming.

Now you're here. Movement 3. And the question shifts:

Not "How do I survive?" (That was the swamp.)

Not "How do I receive grace?" (That was the water's edge.)

But **"How do I live?"**

How do I build a life that doesn't produce swamps? How do I develop rhythms that sustain instead of drain? How do I walk forward in a way that doesn't collapse back into crisis?

This is the movement of integration. Of sustainable formation. Of learning to live from grace instead of toward it.

What makes this movement different:

In the swamp, everything was urgent. Desperate. Life-or-death. You were in survival mode.

At the water's edge, everything was encounter. Discovery. Relief. You were experiencing rescue and healing.

But here? Here everything is rhythm. Cultivation. Consistency. You're learning to live.

And that requires something different from you.

Not the dramatic cry for help. Not the overwhelming experience of grace washing over you.

But the steady, daily choice to walk in rhythm. To send roots deep. To trust the story. To believe nothing is wasted. To fight from victory. To be present.

This is harder in some ways. Because it's not dramatic. It's daily.

But it's also where real transformation happens. Not in the crisis moment or the mountain-top experience, but in the unforced rhythms of everyday faithfulness.

The metaphor: From Running to Walking

In the swamp, you were running—frantic, panicked, desperate to escape.

At the water's edge, you stopped running. You stood still. You let yourself be held, washed, healed.

But now you're learning to walk. Not running from crisis. Not standing still in relief. But walking—one foot in front of the other, step by step, breath by breath.

Walking has rhythm. It's not urgent. It's not static. It's movement with cadence. Sustainable. Steady. Natural.

That's what these six chapters teach: the walk. The rhythm. The unforced way of living that doesn't burn out because it was never built on urgency or hype in the first place.

Before You Enter These Chapters:

Take a moment to acknowledge the shift you're making.

You're not in crisis anymore. (Thank God.) But that also means the adrenaline is gone. The urgency that carried you through the swamp and propelled you to the water's edge—that intensity won't sustain you here.

Here, you need something different: faithfulness. Consistency. Rhythm. The willingness to show up day after day, even when it doesn't feel dramatic.

Can you do that?

Can you trade the intensity of crisis for the steadiness of rhythm?

Can you trust that transformation happens not just in breakthrough moments, but in the daily faithfulness of putting one foot in front of the other?

If you can, you're ready for Movement 3.

If you're not sure yet, that's okay too. These chapters will teach you. Step by step. Breath by breath. One rhythm at a time.

Welcome to the unforced rhythms of grace. This is where you learn to live beyond crisis—not just surviving, but thriving. Not just rescued, but rooted. Not just healed, but whole.

When you're ready, turn to Chapter 9: Unforced Rhythms of Grace.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 9)

MOVEMENT 3: UNFORCED RHYTHMS OF LIFE (The Transformation)

Chapter 9: Unforced Rhythms of Grace

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest... Learn from me... and you will find rest for your souls." — Matthew 11:28-29

Mindful Bliss of Grace

Listen at: <http://go.skylertthomas.com/jYgQNf>



Scan to listen: Mindful Bliss of Grace

An Invitation to Rest

You've walked through eight chapters now. You've named the swamp, cried out for help, made a decision, let something die, stepped into living water, found shelter in grace's shadow, received what you don't deserve, and dug deep to let healing reach the wounds.

You've experienced dramatic grace. Life-changing encounters. Rescue. Cleansing. Healing.

But now I need to ask you something important:

Are you exhausted from trying to maintain the intensity?

Because here's what happens after the crisis: We try to keep the fire burning through sheer effort and willpower. We pray longer. Read more. Volunteer for everything. We assume that sustaining grace requires the same intensity as receiving it.

And we almost crash again. Different swamp, same drowning.

Here's what I've discovered: **Grace isn't meant to be lived in constant crisis mode.**

The swamp taught you honesty. The water's edge taught you grace. But now? Now you're learning something that might feel revolutionary—or maybe even scandalous:

You don't have to keep performing. You can rest. Even while you're working.

This chapter is about the shift from frenzy to rhythm. From desperate intervention to daily bread. From crisis faith to sustainable presence.

It's about discovering that grace offers rhythm—a sustainable way of walking with God that actually fits with how you're made. Not manufactured intensity. Not constant peak experiences. Not exhausting striving.

Unforced rhythms.

But here's the challenge: If you've been living in frenzy for years—and most of us have—rhythm will feel foreign at first. Maybe even wrong. The guilt will whisper, "Shouldn't I be doing more?" The fear will ask, "What if I fall behind?" The comparison will accuse, "Everyone else seems busier. Am I being lazy?"

So before you continue, pause. Consider:

Can you say, even tentatively: "God, I'm tired of running. I'm willing to learn a different pace. I'm willing to believe that You delight in me when I'm resting as much as when I'm working. Teach me Your unforced rhythms."

That's enough. That willingness opens the door.

Because what comes next isn't about doing more—it's about living from a different place. Not striving toward fullness, but living from fullness. Not working for rest, but working from rest.

Welcome to the unforced rhythms of grace.

Let's be honest about what rhythm actually feels like. Because if you've been living in frenzy for years—and most of us have—rhythm will feel foreign at first. Maybe even wrong.

Rhythm feels like:

- **Breath:** Deep, full, unforced. You're not gasping anymore. You're breathing.
- **Pace:** You're walking, not sprinting. And you're not collapsing from exhaustion at the end of the day.
- **Space:** There's margin in your calendar. Silence in your schedule. Room to breathe.
- **Presence:** You're actually here. Not mentally rehearsing the next thing or replaying the last thing. Here.

- **Simplicity:** You've stopped juggling seventeen balls and picked up the three that actually matter.

But here's what rhythm might also feel like, at least at first:

- **Guilt:** "Shouldn't I be doing more?"
- **Fear:** "What if I fall behind?"
- **Comparison:** "Everyone else seems busier. Am I being lazy?"
- **Disorientation:** "I don't know how to just be. I only know how to do."

This is normal. Because rhythm challenges everything our culture teaches us about productivity, worth, and significance.

Our culture says: More is better. Busy is virtuous. Rest is weakness. Your value is measured by your output.

Grace says: Enough is enough. Sustainable is sustainable. Rest is sacred. Your value was settled at the cross.

"The great danger facing all of us is not that we shall make an absolute failure of life, nor that we shall fall into outright viciousness, nor that we shall be terribly unhappy... The danger is that we may fail to perceive life, and fall into a working routine and a sleeping routine." — Dallas Willard, The Spirit of the Disciplines

Rhythm requires unlearning. It requires deprogramming years of messages that tied your worth to your productivity. It requires believing something scandalous: God delights in you when you're resting as much as when you're working.

Maybe more.

Key Themes

1. From Hype to Home: The Set Point Theory

There's a concept in psychology called the "set point" theory of happiness. It suggests that each of us has a baseline level of well-being—a natural temperament that's relatively stable over time. Good things happen, bad things happen, but we tend to return to our set point.

Here's why this matters for understanding grace: Grace doesn't promise constant emotional highs. It doesn't promise that every day will feel like a mountaintop experience.

Grace offers something better: a stable foundation beneath the fluctuations.

Not hype, but home.

Not peak experiences, but sustainable presence.

Not manufactured intensity, but authentic rhythm.

Think about it: You can have a hard day and still be grounded in grace. You can feel sad and still be held by God. You can experience disappointment, frustration, even anger—and still be living in the unforced rhythms of grace.

Because grace isn't about eliminating life's natural ups and downs. It's about providing the steady baseline—the set point—from which you experience them.

I spent years chasing the high. The worship experience that gave me goosebumps. The prayer time where I felt God's presence palpably. The Bible study where everything clicked and I was convinced I'd finally "got it."

And then I'd crash. The goosebumps would fade. The presence would feel distant. The clarity would blur. And I'd think, "I'm losing it. I'm backsliding. I need to try harder."

So I'd manufacture the intensity. Force the experience. Push for the feeling.

And I'd burn out. Again and again.

Until I discovered: Grace isn't the high. Grace is the home. The stable foundation. The set point.

Some days are up. Some days are down. But underneath it all, there's grace. Steady. Reliable. New every morning.

Henri Nouwen captures this beautifully:

"The greatest gift of the spiritual life is to be able to rest in God's presence." — Henri Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal Son

Not to perform in God's presence. Not to achieve in God's presence. To rest. This is the home we're invited into—a place of abiding rest beneath all the fluctuations.

2. Daily Bread, Daily Grace: The Manna Experience

When Israel wandered in the wilderness, God provided manna—bread from heaven—every single morning. But there were rules: gather only what you need for today. Don't try to hoard it for tomorrow. Trust that tomorrow will have its own provision.

When Israel first saw it, they said "Man hu?"—"What is it?" The question mark. They didn't recognize God's provision because it didn't look like what they expected.

But day after day, as they gathered it and ate it and were sustained by it, the question mark changed to an exclamation mark. "This is God's provision! This is grace made tangible!"

Living in unforced rhythms means participating in a manna experience:

- You don't have to figure out next month's provision today

- You just gather today's manna
- You trust tomorrow will have its own
- You don't hoard grace; you receive it fresh each morning

This is what Jesus taught His disciples to pray: "Give us this day our daily bread." Not weekly bread. Not monthly bread. Daily bread.

Because grace is meant to be received in rhythm—morning by morning, day by day.

I'm a planner. I want to have the next three months figured out. I want backup plans for my backup plans. I want to secure tomorrow's grace today, just in case God doesn't show up tomorrow.

But that's not how manna works. That's not how grace works.

When Israel tried to hoard manna, it rotted. It bred worms. It stank.

When I try to hoard grace—when I try to manufacture tomorrow's provision today—it does the same thing. It becomes dead religion instead of living relationship. Performance instead of presence. Anxiety instead of trust.

The manna experience teaches me: Today's grace is sufficient for today. And tomorrow's grace will come tomorrow.

This is freedom. The freedom to be fully present to today instead of anxiously trying to control tomorrow.

3. From Survival to Thriving: Asking Different Questions

There's a fundamental difference between surviving and thriving. Survival is crisis management. Thriving is intentional cultivation.

In the swamp, survival was the only option. How do I make it through today? How do I keep breathing? How do I not completely fall apart?

At the water's edge, you moved from crisis to cleansing. Still focused on immediate needs—getting clean, finding healing, experiencing rescue.

But in the unforced rhythms of grace, you're learning to thrive. You're not just reacting to crises anymore. You're building a sustainable life. You're asking different questions:

- What do I want to see MORE of in my life?
- What do I want to see LESS of?
- What do I want NOT AT ALL anymore?

From these questions come projects, goals, plans. Not frantic New Year's resolutions that set you up for failure. But grace-paced renewal that leads to transformation.

MORE: Connection with God. Authentic community. Creative expression. Rest. Joy. Presence.

LESS: Hurry. Performance. People-pleasing. Comparison. Distraction.

NOT AT ALL: Shame. Fear-based motivation. Relationships that drain rather than energize. Commitments that don't align with my calling.

These aren't rules. They're rhythms. Patterns you choose because they bring life.

And here's the beautiful thing: When you live from these rhythms long enough, they stop feeling like discipline and start feeling like desire. You don't have to force yourself to rest—you crave it. You don't have to remind yourself to be present—it becomes natural.

This is the shift from duty to delight. From obligation to overflow. From working toward rest to working from rest.

Becoming Real Takes Time

But let's be honest: this transformation doesn't happen overnight. The shift from frenzy to rhythm, from performance to presence, from duty to delight—it's gradual. It requires patience with yourself.

Margery Williams captures this beautifully in *The Velveteen Rabbit*:

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." — Margery Williams, The Velveteen Rabbit

Becoming Real—learning to live in unforced rhythms—means being loved into authenticity over time. It means:

- Your rough edges get worn smooth not through self-improvement programs, but through the daily friction of grace
- You get "loose in the joints"—less rigid, more flexible, more able to bend without breaking
- You become "shabby" by the world's standards—less polished, less impressive, less concerned with appearances
- But you're Real. Authentic. No longer performing. No longer pretending. Just present.

This is what the unforced rhythms are creating in you. Not overnight transformation. Not instant perfection. But steady, gentle, persistent becoming.

You're being loved into who you actually are. And that takes time. Be patient with yourself.

4. Jesus' Rhythm: The Model for Sustainability

If you want to understand unforced rhythms, watch Jesus. He's the master of sustainable spiritual life. He never burned out. Never collapsed under the weight of ministry. Never lost His connection to the Father.

How?

Rhythm.

Mark 1:35 captures it perfectly:

"Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray." — Mark 1:35 (NLT)

This wasn't a one-time event. It was His pattern. His rhythm. Withdrawal and engagement. Solitude and community. Prayer and action. Rest and work.

Jesus would pour Himself out in ministry—teaching, healing, casting out demons, engaging with crowds. Then He would withdraw. To a solitary place. To pray. To reconnect with the Father. To be refilled.

He didn't wait until He was empty. He maintained the rhythm.

Engagement. Withdrawal. Engagement. Withdrawal.

Because He lived in this rhythm, He had something to give. Not out of duty. Not out of obligation. Out of overflow.

This is the model. This is what sustainable looks like.

And notice: Jesus faced immense pressure to skip the rhythm. People were sick. Crowds were waiting. Disciples were asking questions. There was always more to do.

But He protected the rhythm. He withdrew even when others wanted more from Him. He rested even when the need was urgent.

Why? Because He knew: If I don't maintain the rhythm, I'll have nothing to give. And giving from empty isn't sustainable.

I've spent most of my Christian life trying to give from empty. Leading worship when I was spiritually depleted. Teaching when I hadn't spent time with God myself. Serving when I desperately needed rest.

And I wondered why I burned out. Why ministry felt like a burden. Why I was always exhausted.

Jesus shows a different way. Maintain the rhythm. Withdrawal and engagement. Empty and refill. Rest and work. Henri Nouwen, who wrote extensively about this pattern, observed:

"Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. Solitude begins with a time and place for God, and him alone." — Henri Nouwen, Making All Things New

Not after you've earned it. Not when the work is done. As part of the work.

Stories of Rhythm

The Manna in the Wilderness (Exodus 16:4-31)

God's provision for Israel in the wilderness wasn't a one-time miracle. It was a daily rhythm. Every morning, manna appeared on the ground. Every morning, the people had to go out and gather it.

"Then the LORD said to Moses, 'I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.'" — Exodus 16:4

This was a test. But not the kind we usually think of. Not a test of performance. A test of trust.

Could they gather only what they needed for today and trust that tomorrow would have its own provision?

Some couldn't. They tried to hoard manna for the next day, and it rotted. They tried to control tomorrow's provision, and it turned to worms.

But those who learned the rhythm—gather today's manna, trust tomorrow's will come—were sustained. Day after day. Year after year. Bread from heaven in daily rhythm.

God could have given them a month's worth at once. He didn't. Because He was teaching them something more important than efficient meal planning.

He was teaching them to trust. To live in daily dependence. To develop a rhythm of receiving.

The same lesson applies to us. We want the mega-dose of grace that will last forever. God gives us daily bread. Not because He's stingy, but because He wants relationship. He wants us to come back every morning. To receive fresh grace. To maintain the rhythm.

Elijah's Rhythm of Rest and Engagement (1 Kings 19:1-18)

Elijah had just experienced one of the greatest spiritual victories in Israel's history. Mount Carmel. Fire from heaven consuming the water-soaked altar. The prophets of Baal defeated, executed. Rain ending a three-year drought. The entire nation witnessing God's power. Elijah at the peak of his ministry, running in the strength of the Lord.

And then, one message from Queen Jezebel: "By this time tomorrow, you'll be dead like the prophets you killed."

And Elijah crashed.

Not gradually. Instantly. He ran for his life into the wilderness, a day's journey into barren, empty wasteland. He collapsed under a broom tree—a scraggly desert bush offering minimal shade—and prayed to die:

"I have had enough, LORD. Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19:4).

This is burnout. Total depletion. The crash after the adrenaline high. One day he's calling down fire; the next day he wants to die.

God's response is instructive. He didn't rebuke Elijah for weakness. Didn't say, "Pull yourself together—you just won a great victory!" Didn't lecture him about faith or courage. Didn't demand that he get back to work.

Instead, God gave him exactly what he needed: rest, food, and time.

An angel touched him: "Get up and eat." Elijah opened his eyes to find fresh-baked bread and a jar of water. He ate. And slept. The angel came again: "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." Again, Elijah ate and drank. And then he traveled forty days and nights to Mount Horeb, strengthened by that food, resting as he went.

Only after that—after Elijah had been physically restored, emotionally recovered, spiritually renewed—did God speak to him. Not in the earthquake or the wind or the fire, but in a gentle whisper. And only then did God give him his next assignment.

God honored the rhythm. Work. Rest. Engagement. Withdrawal. Victory. Recovery. Intensity. Sabbath.

Elijah had been running on adrenaline and spiritual intensity. God invited him into sustainable rhythm.

This is permission for us. You can have a mountain-top experience and then need to rest. That's not failure. That's human. That's how God designed you.

Elijah's story tells me: It's okay to be tired after a victory. It's okay to need recovery time. It's okay to sleep and eat and rest before diving into the next thing.

God isn't impressed by our burnout. He's pleased by our sustainability.

The Sabbath Rest (Genesis 2:2-3; Mark 2:27)

The pattern of Sabbath is woven into creation itself. On the seventh day, God rested. Not because He was tired. But to establish a pattern. A rhythm. Six days of work. One day of rest.

This isn't arbitrary. It's design. God made you to need rest. To need rhythm. To need patterns of engagement and withdrawal, work and Sabbath.

When the religious leaders tried to turn Sabbath into a legalistic burden, Jesus reclaimed it:

*"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."
— Mark 2:27*

Sabbath is a gift. A rhythm designed for your flourishing. It's not about rule-keeping. It's about soul-keeping.

Sabbath says: Your worth isn't measured by your productivity. You are beloved even when you're not producing. In fact, resting is an act of faith—trusting that God will sustain the world for 24 hours without your help.

I used to see Sabbath as wasted time. A day I could be getting things done. But now I see it as the axis around which the whole week revolves. The day that reminds me: I am not what I produce. I am God's beloved child. And that's enough.

Walter Brueggemann writes:

"Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes. It is the pause that transforms." — Walter Brueggemann, Sabbath as Resistance

This is what I'm learning. Sabbath isn't just recovery time so I can work harder the next week. It's transformative time—reshaping how I see myself, my work, my worth. The pause itself does the deeper work.

The Core Scripture Truth

Matthew 11:28-30 - "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, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

This is Jesus' manifesto for sustainable spiritual life. Let's unpack it slowly:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened"

Jesus' invitation is not to the strong, the capable, the ones who have it all together. It's to the exhausted. The burned out. The ones carrying loads they were never meant to carry.

If you're tired—not just physically tired, but soul-tired—you're exactly who Jesus is calling.

"I will give you rest"

Not "I will give you more work." Not "I will give you higher standards." Rest. Real rest. Soul rest. The kind of rest that comes not from escaping responsibility but from living in rhythm with grace.

"Take my yoke upon you"

A yoke is a working tool. Jesus isn't calling you to quit everything and retreat from life. He's calling you to work—but to work in partnership with Him. To let Him set the pace. To let Him carry the weight. To work in His strength, not your own.

"Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart"

The teacher matters. Jesus doesn't drive you with shame. Doesn't demand perfection. Doesn't measure your worth by your productivity.

He is gentle. Humble. Patient. And as you learn from Him—as you watch His rhythms, adopt His patterns, live in His pace—you discover a different way of being.

"You will find rest for your souls"

Not just physical rest. Soul rest. The deep, abiding peace that comes from living in alignment with how you were made. From walking in the unforced rhythms of grace.

"My yoke is easy and my burden is light"

Easy doesn't mean effortless. It means well-fitting. Like a yoke custom-made for the ox wearing it. Jesus' way of life fits you. It's designed for human beings. It's sustainable.

Light doesn't mean weightless. It means right-sized. Not crushing. Not overwhelming. Bearable. In fact, more than bearable—life-giving.

The Wayfarer Moment

The shift from frenzy to rhythm doesn't happen all at once. It happens one choice at a time.

For years, I lived in frenzy. Crisis mode. Always reacting. Always behind. Always exhausted. I thought that's what faithfulness looked like—burning out for Jesus.

But frenzy isn't faithfulness. It's fear. Fear that if I slow down, I'll fall behind. Fear that if I rest, I'll be lazy. Fear that if I'm not producing, I'm not valuable.

The wayfarer moment came when I realized: this isn't sustainable. I can't keep living like this. And God doesn't want me to.

I began to ask different questions:

- What rhythms bring me life?

- What drains me?
- What does rest actually look like for me?
- What does Jesus' invitation to "easy and light" mean practically?

And slowly—so slowly—I started making different choices.

I started saying no to some good things so I could say yes to the most important things.

I started protecting time for rest, not as an afterthought when all the work was done, but as a priority woven into my rhythm.

I started paying attention to my limits and honoring them instead of pretending they didn't exist.

I started gathering today's manna and trusting that tomorrow would have its own.

This didn't happen overnight. It's still happening. I still slip into frenzy sometimes. I still over-commit. I still try to hoard tomorrow's grace instead of receiving today's.

But I'm learning. Learning the unforced rhythms. Learning to walk in step with grace. Learning to work from rest instead of toward it.

And here's what I'm discovering: sustainable faithfulness is possible. You don't have to burn out to be faithful. You don't have to collapse to prove your devotion. You can live in rhythm. You can thrive.

Song Integration

I was drowning in activity when I discovered that Jesus' yoke is actually easy. For years, I'd been living at breakneck speed—calendar packed, to-do list never-ending, mind constantly racing. I wore busyness like a badge of honor, convinced that exhaustion proved devotion. But I was running on fumes, burned out. Then I crashed. Not

dramatically—just stopped.

In that crashed season, my counselor asked me a question I couldn't answer: "When was the last time you noticed God's presence without trying to do anything with it?" I sat there, silent. Because every spiritual practice had become performance. Every quiet time had an agenda. I'd turned even rest into productivity. He gave me one assignment: "Go for a walk. Don't pray. Don't problem-solve. Don't plan. Just notice." And then: "Read Matthew 11:28-30. Not to study it. Just to hear it."

Eugene Peterson's translation in *The Message* unlocked everything: *"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."*

Unforced rhythms. That phrase stopped me. Because everything in my life felt forced—forced discipline, forced devotion, forced productivity. I was carrying a yoke, but it wasn't easy and light. It was heavy and crushing. And Jesus was saying: That's not My yoke. Mine has rhythm. And the rhythm is unforced.

So I went for the walk. One of the first times I'd walked without an agenda in years. No podcast. No problem to solve. Just walking. Noticing. The sun coming up. Air cool. Dew on the grass catching the light. Birds singing. My own breathing—in and out, steady, unforced. And I felt something I hadn't felt in years: peace. Not the absence of problems, but a deep-down settledness that said, "This moment is enough."

This was what Jesus meant. This unforced presence. This gentle noticing. This rhythm that doesn't demand but invites. Not the frenzy of "I have to do more" but the rhythm of "I'm already held." Not the grinding of "I must prove my worth" but the breathing of "I'm already

loved." Not the striving of "If I just work harder" but the resting of "Grace is already here."

The song had to *sound* unforced. So the tempo is slow, gentle—like a walk, not a run. Like inhaling and exhaling, not gasping. The melody flows without sharp edges. The instrumentation is sparse—space between the notes, room to breathe. The opposite of the packed-calendar, no-margin life I'd been living. This is what "unforced rhythms" sounds like. Not lazy or passive, but not frantic either. Just present, attentive, alive to what's here.

The verses move through different times of day—sunset, morning, starry night—each one an invitation to notice, to be present. But then the chorus shifts from contemplation to declaration: *"Great is Your faithfulness, steady and true, mercies each morning are always brand new."* This anchors everything in Lamentations 3:22-23. Life still has ebb and flow, but underneath it all, there's grace—steady, reliable, new every morning. Not just when I'm productive or achieving. Every morning. New mercies. Faithful presence.

The bridge acknowledges reality: "Life feels like ebb and flow, highs and lows take their toll." Because the chaos does return. But now I have a different response: "But in Your presence I find my rest, held in the stillness You manifest." Rest isn't the absence of activity. Rest is presence—being held in God's stillness even when life isn't still.

When I slip back into frenzy, I sing this. And it brings me back—back to breath, back to rhythm, back to the truth that Jesus' yoke is easy and His burden is light. This is what Jesus meant when He said "Learn from me." Not a curriculum to master but a rhythm to learn, a way of walking, a pace that sustains instead of drains. Not frenzy—rhythm. Not grinding—grace. Not forced—unforced.

Lyrics: Mindful Bliss of Grace

[Verse 1]

Ebb and flow, the waves embrace my feet,
Your whispers call where sea and skylines meet.
The setting sun declares the close of day,
Your steadfast love shines bright along the way.

[Chorus]

Great is Your faithfulness, steady and true,
Mercies each morning are always brand new.
Through every season, Your love still persists,
You lead me, Lord, into mindful bliss.

[Verse 2]

Morning dew reflects Your tender grace,
The sunlight streaks reveal Your holy face.
Each step I take along the sandy trail,
Your voice reminds me, love will never fail.

[Chorus]

Great is Your faithfulness, steady and true,
Mercies each morning are always brand new.
Through every season, Your love still persists,
You lead me, Lord, into mindful bliss.

[Verse 3]

Starry skies proclaim Your mighty name,
The moon's soft glow reveals Your love remains.

I lift my heart and cast my cares above,
Your Spirit wraps me in eternal love.

[Chorus]

Great is Your faithfulness, steady and true,
Mercies each morning are always brand new.
Through every season, Your love still persists,
You lead me, Lord, into mindful bliss.

[Bridge]

Through trials and storms, through winds that roar,
Your steadfast grace remains forevermore.
Each tear I cry, each prayer I raise,
Lifts me higher to endless praise.

[Verse 4]

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.
Mercies descending from heaven above,
Filling my heart with Your endless love.

[Outro]

Into mindful bliss, I rest in Your grace,
Each moment I live, I behold Your face.
Your mercies endure, Your promises stay,

Forever I'll walk in Your holy way.

Key Takeaways

- **Grace offers rhythm, not frenzy.** You don't have to maintain crisis-level intensity to stay faithful. Jesus' yoke is easy and light because it fits how you're designed to live.
- **Receive daily bread, don't hoard tomorrow's grace.** Like manna in the wilderness, grace is meant to be gathered fresh each morning. Trust today's provision and let tomorrow take care of itself.
- **Work from rest, not toward it.** Sustainable faithfulness means maintaining rhythm—withdrawal and engagement, solitude and community, Sabbath and work—just as Jesus modeled.
- **Your worth isn't measured by productivity.** Resting is an act of faith, declaring that God values you as His beloved child whether you're producing or simply being present.

Reflections for the Road

Questions for the Journey:

1. Where are you living in frenzy instead of rhythm?

Look at your calendar. Your commitments. Your daily patterns. Where are you reacting instead of choosing?

Name one specific area where you're running on adrenaline rather than grace. What would it look like to bring rhythm to that area?

2. What does "daily bread" look like for you?

What are the daily practices that actually sustain you—not the ones you think you should do, but the ones that genuinely nourish you?

Are you gathering today's manna and trusting tomorrow's will come? Or are you hoarding, striving, trying to stockpile enough to feel safe?

3. Read Matthew 11:28-30 slowly.

"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, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

What does Jesus' invitation to "easy and light" mean for you today? Where are you carrying a yoke that's too heavy—burdens He never asked you to bear?

4. What rhythm is missing from your life right now?

Sabbath? Daily prayer? Regular solitude? Time in nature? Unhurried meals? Creative expression?

Be specific. What would it look like to build this rhythm into your week?

5. How will you protect one rhythm this week?

Not add more. Protect one. Sabbath, daily prayer, a walk, a practice that brings life.

What will you say no to in order to say yes to this rhythm? When will you do it? Put it on your calendar right now.

Practice: Creating Your Rule of Life

Many Christians throughout history have created what they called a "Rule of Life"—not rules in the legalistic sense, but rhythms. Patterns. A framework for sustainable spiritual living.

Here's a simple process:

1. Listen to your life

What brings you life? What drains you? When do you feel most connected to God? Pay attention for a few days.

2. Identify life-giving rhythms

Based on what you've noticed, what rhythms sustain you? Morning prayer? Weekly Sabbath? Daily walks? Regular connection with friends?

3. Build them into your life as rhythm, not rules

The difference: rules say "you have to." Rhythms say "this is life-giving." Don't try to implement everything at once. Pick one or two rhythms this month.

4. Hold them loosely

Life changes. Seasons change. What worked last year might not work this year. That's okay. The goal is sustainability, not perfection.

5. Review and adjust

Every few months, review your rhythms. What's working? What's not? What needs to change?

Closing Image

You're not at the water's edge anymore. You've waded in deeper. And you've discovered something surprising: the water has a current.

Not a violent current that sweeps you away. A gentle current. A flow. And when you stop fighting it—when you stop trying to control every movement—you realize the current is carrying you.

This is what the unforced rhythms feel like. You're not striving anymore. Not forcing. Not manufacturing spiritual experiences or trying to prove your worth through exhausting effort.

You're flowing. With grace. In rhythm.

Some days the water is calm. You float. You rest. You simply be.

Some days the water is active. You swim. You work. You engage. But even the swimming feels different now. You're not swimming against the current, desperately trying to get somewhere. You're swimming with it, letting it carry you along.

You look up and see the sun filtering through the water. Streaks of light. Steady. Reliable. New every morning.

Great is His faithfulness.

You take a breath—deep, full, unforced. And you realize: this is sustainable. This is how you were meant to live. Not in crisis mode. Not in frenzy. But in rhythm. In flow. In the unforced rhythms of grace.

Into mindful bliss.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 10)

MOVEMENT 3: UNFORCED RHYTHMS OF LIFE (The Transformation)

Chapter 10: Deep Roots, Strong Growth

"Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD... They will be like a tree planted by the water... Its leaves are always green; it has no worries... and never fails to bear fruit." — Jeremiah 17:7-8

I Will Trust You Lord

Listen at: <http://go.skylertthomas.com/DxCmnx>



Scan to listen: I Will Trust You Lord

An Invitation to Go Deeper

You've discovered rhythm. You've learned the unforced way of living. You're not in crisis mode anymore, not frantically trying to maintain impossible intensity.

But now I need to ask you something uncomfortable:

When stress comes, when pressure mounts, when circumstances get hard—do you still revert to old patterns?

Be honest. Do you still react defensively when criticized? Still withdraw when hurt? Still carry bitterness longer than you should? Still struggle with pride, with comparison, with the need to prove yourself?

Here's what I've discovered: **Rhythms are good. But rhythms without roots become rote. Practices without depth become performance.**

You need more than sustainable patterns. You need deep foundations. The kind that reach down to streams of living water and anchor you when everything else shakes.

This chapter is about what happens underground. The hidden work. The slow transformation that no one sees but everyone eventually experiences.

It's about discovering that you're not just learning new habits—you're becoming a new person. And becoming takes time. It happens in the dark, unseen, in the patient work of roots going deep.

Think of a tree during drought. Surface plants die—they had no depth, no reserves, nothing to draw from when conditions got hard. But the deeply rooted? They stay green. Not because they're stronger or trying harder. Because their roots have gone deep enough to reach water others can't access.

That's what this chapter is about. Not what you look like on the surface. But what's happening underground.

Deep roots require putting to death what doesn't belong: pride, reactivity, isolation, bitterness. And cultivating what does: humility, responsiveness, connection, forgiveness.

None of this is impressive. None of this gets applause. None of this makes for a dramatic testimony.

But it's everything. Because roots determine what happens above ground.

So before you continue, pause. Consider:

Can you say, even with hesitation: "God, I don't just want to look different. I want to BE different. Do the deep work in me—the underground work, the unseen work. Send my roots down deep until I'm anchored in You, not in circumstances."

That's the prayer that opens transformation.

Because what comes next isn't about impressive growth. It's about sustainable depth.

Here's the hard truth about roots: you can't see them. You can't measure them. You can't Instagram them.

All the visible growth—the fruit, the leaves, the branches—gets attention. But the roots? They're hidden. Underground. Doing their work in the dark.

This is frustrating for those of us who like to track progress. We want to see results. We want to measure growth. We want before-and-after photos that prove we're changing.

But deep roots don't work that way.

Deep roots look like:

- Choosing to respond instead of react, even when no one's watching

- Forgiving someone who doesn't deserve it and will never know you did
- Staying connected to community when you'd rather withdraw
- Releasing bitterness for the hundredth time because it keeps trying to take root
- Practicing humility in small, daily choices that no one applauds

None of that is impressive. None of that gets likes on social media. None of that makes for a dramatic testimony.

But it's everything. Because roots determine what happens above ground.

When the drought comes—and it will come—surface plants die. They had no depth. No reserves. Nothing to draw from when conditions got hard.

But the deeply rooted? They stay green. Not because they're stronger or trying harder. Because their roots have gone deep enough to reach water others can't access.

The question isn't "What do I look like on the surface?"

The question is "What's happening underground?"

Key Themes

1. The Work of Putting to Death

Before roots can go deep into what belongs, they have to let go of what doesn't. This is the paradox at the heart of spiritual growth: deep roots require dying.

There are things that have to be put to death:

Pride - The need to be right. The compulsion to prove ourselves. The addiction to being seen, recognized, validated by others.

Pride keeps roots shallow because it keeps us focused on ourselves rather than God. We're constantly comparing, competing, defending, performing. All that energy goes into image management rather than transformation.

I've spent years defending myself. Explaining myself. Making sure people understood my motives. And all that defending kept me shallow. Because I was more concerned with how I looked than with who I was becoming.

Humility is the antidote. Not self-hatred. But what Paul calls "considering others more significant than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). The freedom to be wrong and still be loved. To lose the argument and not lose yourself.

Reactivity - Responding from wounds instead of from identity. When someone criticizes you, do you react defensively? When life doesn't go your way, do you lash out? When you feel threatened, do you attack?

Reactivity is living from your False Self—the wounded, defended, self-protective version of you.

Deep roots grow when you learn to respond from your True Self—the beloved, secure, grounded-in-God version of you.

There's a space between what happens to us and how we respond. In that space lies our power to choose. Viktor Frankl called this the essence of human freedom—the ability to choose our response even in the most difficult circumstances.

I've been working on this for years, and I still fail regularly. Someone questions my decision, and I immediately get defensive. Someone misunderstands my motives, and I rush to explain. Someone hurts me, and I want to hurt back.

But I'm learning. Learning to pause. To feel the reaction without acting on it. To ask: "Is this coming from my woundedness or from my belovedness?"

That pause—that space between stimulus and response—is where deep roots grow.

Isolation - The temptation to withdraw when things get hard. To hide your struggles. To pretend you're fine when you're not.

Isolation is the enemy of deep roots. Trees don't grow in isolation—they grow in groves, forests, communities where their roots intertwine with other roots, creating stability and sharing nutrients.

I'm an introvert. When I'm hurting, my instinct is to withdraw. To pull back. To process alone. And sometimes that's healthy. But isolation as a lifestyle? That's deadly.

Deep roots require staying connected even when you want to withdraw. Showing up to community even when you don't feel like it. Being honest about your struggles even when it's scary.

Bitterness - The nursing of perceived injustices. The rehearsal of how you've been wronged. The keeping of records. The refusal to forgive.

Bitterness is like poison in the soil. It doesn't hurt the person you're bitter toward—it hurts you. It keeps your roots shallow and twisted, unable to reach the streams of living water because they're too busy clinging to old wounds.

I've carried bitterness. Rehearsed conversations with people who hurt me. Kept score. Built cases. And all that bitterness did was keep me stuck.

Forgiveness is the answer. Not because what happened was okay. But because holding onto it gives it power over you.

You release it so your roots can grow deep into grace rather than staying tangled in grievance.

"To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you." — Lewis B. Smedes, Forgive and Forget

Putting things to death is only half the work of sending roots deep. The other half is actively cultivating what belongs—replacing what dies with what brings life.

2. The Work of Cultivating What Belongs

Putting to death is only half the work. The other half is cultivating what belongs—the virtues, practices, and postures that create conditions for deep roots.

Humility - Acknowledging your need for grace. Admitting you don't have it all together. Embracing your limits rather than pretending they don't exist.

Humility positions you to receive. Pride keeps you on the surface, performing. Humility sends roots deep, receiving.

Responsiveness - Acting from your True Self, not your wounded self. Learning to pause between stimulus and response.

This requires self-awareness—knowing your triggers, understanding your patterns, recognizing when you're operating from wounds versus operating from belovedness.

And it requires spiritual practices—silence and solitude to hear God's voice, prayer to seek His guidance, Scripture to renew your mind, community to hold you accountable.

Connection - Staying engaged even when vulnerable. Showing up even when it's hard. Choosing relationship over isolation.

I've learned this the hard way: I need people. Not perfect people. Not people who never disappoint me. But people who show up. Who pray for me. Who tell me the truth in love.

Connection is where roots deepen.

Forgiveness - Releasing what you can't control. Letting go of the need for justice, vindication, or revenge.

Forgiveness isn't a one-time decision. It's a daily practice. Sometimes an hourly practice. You choose to release the offense again and again until one day you realize it no longer has power over you.

These practices of putting to death and cultivating life create the conditions for deep roots. And Psalm 1 paints the picture of what a deeply rooted life looks like.

3. The Tree by Streams of Water

Psalm 1 paints a picture of flourishing that captures everything deep roots make possible:

"Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked... but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers." — Psalm 1:1-3

Notice the progression:

Planted, not drifting. Intentional, rooted, stable. You've been planted by streams—the water's edge of grace. Now roots are growing deep.

Streams of water. The tree doesn't generate its own water. It's positioned by an abundant source. You don't generate your own grace. You're rooted in God's inexhaustible provision.

Fruit in season. Not all the time. Not constantly. In season. This is realistic spirituality. There are seasons of growth, seasons of fruit, seasons of dormancy, seasons of pruning. Deep roots don't guarantee constant productivity. They guarantee sustainable fruitfulness over time.

Leaf does not wither. Even in drought—hard seasons when surface moisture evaporates, when emotions are dry, when external supports

fail—the deeply rooted tree endures. Why? Because deep roots access water others can't reach.

Whatever they do prospers. Not prosperity gospel. This is organic flourishing. A well-rooted tree naturally prospers because it's connected to its source.

Stay rooted. The fruit will come. Not forced. Not manufactured. Organic. In season.

This picture of the tree by streams of water is beautiful. But here's what we need to understand: roots like these don't grow overnight. They require something most of us struggle with: time.

4. Roots Take Time

Here's what nobody tells you about deep roots: they take time. Years. Sometimes decades.

We live in an instant culture. We want microwavable transformation. Download the app, follow the seven steps, and boom—you're changed.

But roots don't work that way.

A tree doesn't shoot roots thirty feet down in a week. It takes seasons. Storm after storm. Drought after drought. Year after year, the roots slowly, steadily go deeper.

And for most of that time, you can't see the growth. Above ground, the tree might look unchanged. But below ground, everything is happening.

This is the hidden work of transformation. The work that happens when no one's watching. The work that doesn't make for dramatic testimonies because it's slow, steady, mostly invisible.

I'm fifteen years into this journey. And I'm still discovering shallow roots. Still finding places where I react instead of respond. Still uncovering bitterness I thought I'd released. Still learning to stay connected when I want to withdraw.

But I'm also seeing growth I couldn't see five years ago. Situations that would have wrecked me ten years ago now just... don't. Not because I'm stronger. Because the roots have gone deeper. I'm accessing streams I couldn't reach before.

This is the long obedience in the same direction. This is the slow work of becoming.

And it's worth it. Because when the drought comes—and it will come—deep roots mean the difference between withering and thriving.

"A Christian is never in a state of completion but always in the process of becoming." — Martin Luther, Lectures on Romans

Stories of Roots and Growth

The Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-23)

Picture a farmer at sunrise, walking through his field with a bag of seed slung across his shoulder. He reaches in, pulls out a handful, and with a practiced motion scatters it in a wide arc. The seeds catch the light as they fly—some landing on the hardened path where people walk, some on the rocky outcropping at the field's edge, some among the tangle of thistles and thornbushes, and some on the rich, dark soil he's spent years cultivating.

The birds descend immediately on the path—quick, efficient, merciless. The seed never had a chance. Hard ground, no penetration, gone.

The rocky ground is more deceptive. Within days, bright green shoots push through the thin layer of soil. It looks promising—fast growth, visible progress. But underneath, the roots hit stone. They can't go deep. They spread sideways, searching for depth that isn't there. When

the sun climbs high and hot, these plants are the first to wilt. No water reaches them. The shallow soil heats up. They brown, curl, die. Speed isn't the same as strength.

The thorny ground also shows promise at first. The seeds germinate, the plants grow. But so do the weeds. Thorns that were cut back last season return with a vengeance, growing faster, reaching higher. They don't kill the good plants outright—they just crowd them out. Steal their light. Choke their growth. The plants survive but never thrive, never fruit. They're strangled slowly by competition for resources.

But the good soil—this is different. The seeds sink in. The roots go down, spreading through soil that's been broken up, enriched, prepared. When the sun beats down, these roots reach moisture. When storms come, these roots hold firm. The plants grow steadily—not frantically, but surely. And when harvest comes, they're heavy with grain. Thirty, sixty, a hundred times what was planted.

The rocky ground is particularly relevant here:

"The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away." — Matthew 13:20-21

No root. That's the problem. Enthusiasm without depth. Emotion without foundation.

The person receives the Word with joy—there's initial excitement, genuine response. But when heat comes, they wither. Why? No root.

This is the warning: don't settle for surface-level faith. Don't mistake initial enthusiasm for deep transformation. Send roots deep now—through sustained practices, patient trust, consistent rhythms—so when heat comes (and it will), you don't wither.

The good soil represents those who "hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop" (Mark 4:20). But even good soil requires cultivation.

Weeding. Watering. Tending.

The disciplines are how you cultivate the soil of your soul so roots can go deep and fruit can come.

The Vine and the Branches (John 15:1-8)

Walk through a vineyard in late summer and you'll see the vine—thick, gnarled, ancient—with branches spreading out in all directions. Run your hand along a healthy branch and you can feel it: firm, supple, alive. The connection point where branch meets vine is seamless, organic. Sap flows from the vine through that connection, carrying nutrients, water, life itself.

Pick up a branch that's been cut off and the difference is immediate. It looks similar at first—same shape, same leaves. But touch it and you feel the brittleness. The leaves are already starting to brown at the edges. Give it a few days and it's completely dead, fit only for burning.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." — John 15:5

The key word is "remain"—or "abide." This is the language of roots, of connection that sustains life. Branches don't try to produce fruit through effort or willpower. They remain connected to the vine. And fruit happens naturally, inevitably, organically.

You don't manufacture fruit through striving. You remain connected through sustained practices—prayer that keeps the conversation going, Scripture that keeps the life flowing, worship that keeps the heart open, community that keeps the connection strong. And fruit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—grows the way grapes grow on a branch: not by trying, but by remaining.

But remaining requires intentionality. A branch doesn't have to work to stay connected, but it can be cut off if diseased. It can be pruned to produce more fruit. It can even choose to pull away from the vine. The

vinedresser tends the branches carefully, cutting away what's dead, trimming back what's unproductive, ensuring that every branch that remains produces as much fruit as possible.

The unforced rhythms of grace aren't passive—they're active cooperation with God's life flowing into you. You position yourself under the flow. You remain in the connection. You abide in the relationship. And the fruit comes, not from your effort but from His life in you.

Jeremiah's Promise (Jeremiah 17:7-8)

Picture two trees in the same region during a drought year. The first tree stands alone in an open field, dependent entirely on rainfall. Its roots spread wide but shallow, searching for moisture that isn't there. As the rainless months stretch on, its leaves yellow, then brown. It drops them early, conserving what little moisture remains. It survives, barely, but produces no fruit this year. Maybe next year, if the rains return.

The second tree looks different even from a distance. Its leaves are deep green, almost glossy. It stands tall, full, healthy—not because it's stronger or more resilient by nature, but because of where it's planted: right by a stream. You can see its roots at the water's edge, thick and gnarled, disappearing into the mud. Those roots don't just touch the water—they're in it, drawing constantly from a source that doesn't depend on weather patterns.

*"But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."
—Jeremiah 17:7-8*

This is Jeremiah's promise, and it's built on trust and resilience.

Trust as the foundation. Your roots go where your trust is. If you trust yourself, roots stay shallow—limited by your capacity. If you

trust God, roots go deep—accessing an infinite source.

Does not fear when heat comes. This is the promise: resilience. Heat will come. But deeply rooted trees don't fear it. Not because heat doesn't hurt, but because deep roots access water even when surface conditions are scorching.

Never fails to bear fruit. An even stronger promise than Psalm 1's "fruit in season." Why? Because the tree is constantly connected to the stream. It's not dependent on rainfall (external circumstances). It's rooted by a stream (constant internal source).

When you're deeply rooted in God, you don't become fruitless in hard seasons. The fruit might look different—not abundance, but endurance; not productivity, but presence. But you never fail to bear it.

The Core Scripture Truth

John 15:5-8 - "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

This is Jesus's teaching on remaining—on abiding. And it's the theological foundation for everything this chapter teaches about deep roots.

"I am the vine; you are the branches."

The relationship is organic, not mechanical. Not master and servant. Vine and branches. Living connection. Shared life. The sap that flows through the vine flows through the branches.

You're not disconnected from Jesus, trying to imitate Him from a distance. You're connected to Jesus, sharing His life.

"If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit."

The condition is remaining. Not striving. Not performing. Not white-knuckling your way to holiness. Remaining. Abiding. Staying connected.

And the promise is fruit. Not because you're trying to produce it. But because life is flowing from the vine into the branches. The fruit is inevitable when the connection is sustained.

"Apart from me you can do nothing."

This is both humbling and liberating. Humbling because it reminds you: you're not the source. You can't generate spiritual life through your own effort.

Liberating because it takes the pressure off. You don't have to produce. You just have to remain.

"This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit."

The goal isn't your glory. It's the Father's. When you bear fruit—when love, joy, peace, patience, kindness grow in you—people see it and give glory to God.

Not because you're amazing. Because God's grace is transforming you.

This is the theological anchor: remain in Jesus. Let His words remain in you. And fruit will come—not forced, but organic. Not manufactured, but received. Not through your effort, but through your abiding.

Deep roots make abiding possible. And abiding makes fruit inevitable.

The Wayfarer Moment

Learning to trust the hidden work.

For years, I equated spiritual growth with visible progress. I wanted to see results. Measure outcomes. Track my advancement.

If I couldn't see it, I questioned whether anything was actually happening.

But roots don't work that way.

The most important growth happens underground. Unseen. Unmeasured. Unremarkable to anyone watching.

Above ground, a tree might look unchanged for months. But below ground, roots are spreading, reaching, deepening. And that hidden work is what makes everything else possible.

I learned this the hard way. After coming out of the swamp, after encountering grace at the water's edge, I wanted instant transformation. I wanted to be different immediately—healed, whole, bearing fruit.

But God was growing roots.

There were days when I felt like nothing was changing. I'd pray and feel nothing. Read Scripture and feel unmoved. Gather with community and still feel alone.

But looking back now, I can see what was happening. Roots were going deep. Not dramatically. Not visibly. But steadily.

Through sustained practices. Through showing up even when I didn't feel like it. Through choosing connection over isolation. Through releasing bitterness and cultivating forgiveness.

The wayfarer moment came when I stopped measuring my progress by what I could see and started trusting the hidden work God was doing.

I stopped asking, "Why aren't I different yet?" and started asking, "Am I remaining in Him? Are my roots going deeper?"

Because here's what I've learned: surface-level change happens fast but doesn't last. Deep transformation happens slowly but endures.

You can manufacture behavior change through willpower. But it won't last. The first time stress hits, you'll revert to old patterns.

But deep roots—roots that reach down to streams of living water—create lasting stability. Not perfection. But resilience. Not arrival. But endurance.

I still have hard days. Days when I'm reactive instead of responsive. Days when I choose isolation over connection. Days when bitterness resurfaces and I have to forgive again.

But I don't panic anymore. Because I know: the roots are there. They're deep. And even when I can't see growth above ground, there's work happening below.

This is the invitation: trust the hidden work. Keep showing up. Keep practicing the disciplines. Keep remaining in Jesus. The fruit will come. In season. When roots are ready.

Psalm 1 (NLT)

Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. But they delight in the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do. But not the wicked! They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind. They will be condemned at the time of judgment. Sinners will have no place among the godly. For the LORD watches over the path of the godly, but the path of the wicked leads to destruction. — Psalm 1 (NLT)

Song Integration

The counselor looked at me and said, "You're doing all the right things, but your roots haven't gone deep enough yet."

I didn't want to hear that. I'd been practicing the rhythms for months. Showing up to prayer even when I didn't feel like it. Reading Scripture even when it felt dry. Staying connected to community even when I wanted to withdraw.

But I couldn't see results. I still struggled with the same issues. Still reacted defensively. Still battled pride. Still felt the pull of isolation.

I was discouraged, wondering: *Is any of this working? Am I actually growing? Or am I just going through the motions?*

The answer, I discovered, was that transformation happens underground before it's visible above the surface.

Then I read Psalm 1. And Jeremiah 17. And something clicked.

The tree planted by streams of water doesn't produce fruit immediately. First, roots go down. Deep. Searching for water. Anchoring in soil. Building the underground foundation that will support everything above ground.

The fruit comes later. In season. When roots are ready.

I was expecting visible growth—immediate fruit, dramatic change, measurable progress. But God was doing underground work. Sending my roots deeper. Teaching me to draw from living water instead of surface emotions.

Psalm 1 became my anchor. The image of a tree "replanted in Eden, bearing fresh fruit every month, never dropping a leaf, always in blossom"—that's not describing constant productivity. It's describing sustainable fruitfulness rooted in something deeper than circumstances.

The tree thrives not because it tries harder but because it's connected to a source of life that never runs dry.

That's when "I Will Trust You Lord" was born. The song is a declaration: even when I can't see growth, even when the work feels invisible, even when drought comes—my roots are going deep. I'm planted by streams of living water. And I will trust the hidden work.

The chorus captures the promise: "Like a tree beside the river, I will stand so tall. Through the fire, through the season, You're my all in all."

Not standing because I'm strong. Standing because I'm rooted. Not thriving because conditions are perfect. Thriving because I'm drawing from a source deeper than circumstances.

The bridge confronts the fears: "No fear in the drought... No doubt in the storm... Your love is my anchor... I'll trust You, Lord."

This isn't denial. It's confidence. Rooted confidence that says: I can face drought because my roots go deeper than surface water. I can weather storms because I'm anchored in something immovable.

When I sing this now, it reminds me: the work happening underground is just as real—maybe more real—than the work visible above ground. And if I'll trust the process, keep showing up, keep putting roots down deep, the fruit will come.

In season. When roots are ready.

Lyrics: I Will Trust You Lord

[Verse 1]

I will trust You, Lord, my shelter, my song

Planted by Your stream, where my roots grow strong

When the heat is near, still my leaves stay bright

In the darkest storm, You will be my light

[Pre-Chorus]

Oh, my heart is grounded deep in Your grace

Anchored in Your presence, I will stand in faith

[Chorus]

Like a tree beside the river, I will stand so tall

Through the fire, through the season, You're my all in all

My leaves stay green, my soul stays strong

Your love sustains me all life long

I will bear Your fruit, Lord, make me new

I am deeply rooted in You

[Verse 2]

I will drink Your Word, let it fill my soul

Day and night I'll seek You, Lord, You make me whole

When the winds arise, I will not be swayed

For my roots run deep, I will not be afraid

[Pre-Chorus]

Oh, my heart is grounded deep in Your grace

Anchored in Your presence, I will stand in faith

[Chorus]

Like a tree beside the river, I will stand so tall

Through the fire, through the season, You're my all in all

My leaves stay green, my soul stays strong

Your love sustains me all life long

I will bear Your fruit, Lord, make me new

I am deeply rooted in You

[Bridge]

No fear in the drought (No fear, no fear!)

No doubt in the storm (No doubt, no doubt!)

Your love is my anchor (My heart is Yours!)

I'll trust You, Lord (Forevermore!)

[Final Chorus]

Like a tree beside the river, I will stand so tall

Through the fire, through the season, You're my all in all

My leaves stay green, my soul stays strong

Your love sustains me all life long

I will bear Your fruit, Lord, make me new

I am deeply rooted in You

[Outro]

Deeply rooted, never shaken

By Your love, I stand so strong

Deeply rooted, always faithful

In Your hands, I belong

Key Takeaways

- **Roots determine resilience.** Surface growth impresses, but deep roots sustain. When drought comes, shallow plants wither while deeply rooted trees stay green—not through effort, but through connection to living water.
- **Put pride, reactivity, isolation, and bitterness to death.** These keep roots shallow. Replace them with humility, responsiveness, connection, and forgiveness to create conditions for deep growth.
- **Remain in the vine; fruit follows naturally.** You don't manufacture spiritual fruit through striving. You stay connected to Jesus through sustained practices, and transformation flows from that abiding relationship.
- **Trust the hidden work.** The most important growth happens underground, unseen and unmeasured. Keep showing up, keep practicing, keep remaining—the roots are going deeper than you realize.

Reflections for the Road

Questions for the Journey:

- What needs to die so roots can go deep? Where is pride keeping you shallow? Where is reactivity preventing growth? Where is isolation cutting you off? Where is bitterness poisoning the soil?
- What practices position you by the stream? Prayer? Scripture? Sabbath? Solitude? Worship? Community? Are you practicing them consistently?

- Where are you trying to manufacture fruit instead of remaining in the vine? Are you striving to be more loving? Trying harder to be joyful? White-knuckling your way to peace?
- What does "fruit in season" mean for you right now? Not every season is fruitful. Some are for growth. Some for pruning. Some for rest. What season are you in?

Practice: Cultivating Deep Roots

Here's a simple framework for sending roots deep through spiritual disciplines:

1. Daily: Drink from the stream

Choose one practice that connects you to God daily. Morning prayer and Scripture. Lectio divina. Journaling. Listening prayer in silence. The practice matters less than the consistency.

2. Weekly: Sabbath rest

Set aside one day (or a few hours) each week for Sabbath. Not as legalism. As gift. Stop striving so you can receive rest. Stop producing so you can receive belovedness.

3. Monthly: Solitude and silence

Once a month, create extended space for solitude. A few hours. A half day. A full day if possible. Intentional time alone with God. Away from noise, hurry, screens, people. Listen. Rest. Let God search your heart.

4. Seasonally: Examine your roots

Every few months, review: Are my roots going deeper? Or am I staying shallow? Am I more reactive or more responsive? More isolated or more connected? More bitter or more forgiving?

5. Community: Grow in groves

Trees don't grow in isolation. Their roots intertwine with other roots. You need community. Real community. Where you can confess struggles, receive prayer, offer encouragement, practice forgiveness, serve together.

Closing Image

You're standing at the base of an ancient tree. Massive. Towering. Its canopy spreads wide, providing shade for acres.

How long has this tree been here? A hundred years? Two hundred? More?

You walk closer and place your hand on the trunk. Solid. Rough. Weathered by countless storms. Scarred by lightning strikes. Marked by seasons of growth and seasons of pruning.

But still standing.

You look up into the branches. Birds nest there. Squirrels scamper. Life thrives in the shelter this tree provides.

And then you look down. At the base. Where roots disappear into the earth.

You can't see them. But you know they're there. Reaching deep. Spreading wide. Anchoring this massive tree so firmly that no storm can topple it.

The roots are why the tree stands.

This is the invitation: send your roots deep. Not for show. Not for applause. Not even for immediate fruit.

For stability. For resilience. For sustainable life.

The work happens underground. In the quiet. In the daily practices. In the sustained rhythms. In the patient trust.

You won't always see results. You won't always feel growth. You won't always sense progress.

But if you remain—if you keep showing up, keep practicing the disciplines, keep choosing connection over isolation, keep releasing bitterness and cultivating forgiveness—the roots will go deep.

And when heat comes, you won't fear. When drought arrives, you won't worry. When storms rage, you won't be uprooted.

Because your roots—hidden, deep, sustained by streams of living water—will hold.

Like a tree planted by streams of water. Leaves green. Fruit in season. Soul strong.

Deeply rooted in the love of God.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 11)

MOVEMENT 3: UNFORCED RHYTHMS OF LIFE (The Transformation)

Chapter 11: Redemption's Story

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done." — Genesis 50:20

Redemption Story

Listen at: <http://go.skylertthomas.com/MN36D4>



Scan to listen: Redemption Story

An Invitation to See

You've been through ten chapters now. The swamp. The water's edge. The rhythms. The roots. You've experienced rescue, cleansing, healing, and transformation.

But now I need to ask you something that might change how you see everything:

What if your story isn't separate from THE story?

What if the pain you've experienced has context? What if the waiting has meaning? What if the struggle isn't random?

Here's what I've discovered: **Your story—the swamp and the rescue, the breaking and the healing, the death and the rising—follows the same pattern as every redemption story ever told.**

Creation. Fall. Redemption. Restoration.

This isn't coincidence. It's the arc of reality itself. The shape of how grace works. The pattern woven into the fabric of existence.

You're not just surviving your circumstances. You're participating in the grand narrative of redemption that's been unfolding since before time began.

This chapter is about seeing your story within God's story. And when you do, everything stops being random.

The years in the swamp aren't just years you lost. They're the wilderness—like Israel in the desert, like Elijah in the cave, like David on the run. Necessary preparation for what comes next.

The water's edge isn't just a nice metaphor. It's baptism. It's Red Sea crossing. It's Jordan River moment. The place where the old dies and the new begins.

The unforced rhythms aren't just helpful life hacks. They're manna in the wilderness. They're Sabbath rest. They're the sustainable pace of people learning to walk with God.

The deep roots aren't just personal growth. They're becoming the tree of Psalm 1, the vine of John 15, the planting of the Lord for His glory.

When you see your story within God's story, you start to live differently. With purpose. With hope. With perseverance. With mission.

So before you continue, pause. Consider:

Can you say, even tentatively: "God, my story is part of Your story. The broken chapters, the painful seasons, the years I thought were wasted—they're all woven into the redemption arc You're writing. Help me see my life through that lens."

That shift in perspective changes everything.

Because what comes next isn't just about understanding theology. It's about seeing your life—all of it—as part of the greatest story ever told.

Key Themes

1. The Gospel as THE Story

Christianity isn't one religious option among many. It's THE story—the framework within which human history unfolds. The lens through which we understand who we are, why we're here, what went wrong, and how it's being made right.

The redemption story has a clear arc:

Creation - God makes everything good. Humanity is created in His image, designed for relationship with Him, given purpose and dignity and calling. Before any of us sinned, before any of us fell, we had worth because we were created by God, for God, to reflect God.

Fall - Sin enters through human rebellion. The image is marred. Relationship is broken. Creation is cursed. Death enters the world. Humanity is exiled from Eden. This is the swamp—not just your

personal swamp, but the cosmic swamp we're all born into.

Redemption - God doesn't abandon His creation. He promises a Savior. He calls a people. He gives the Law to reveal sin and point to grace. He sends prophets to declare His faithfulness. And then—in the fullness of time—He sends His Son. Jesus, the eternal Word, becomes flesh. Lives the perfect life we couldn't live. Dies the death we deserved. Rises victorious over sin and death. Accomplishes redemption.

Restoration - The story isn't finished. Jesus ascended but promised to return. He's building His Church. He's reconciling all things to Himself. And one day—the day we're waiting for—He will return to judge the living and the dead, to make all things new, to restore creation to what it was always meant to be.

This is THE story. And you're in it. As Timothy Keller puts it:

"The Christian story is that God descended into our mess, took the full brunt of our sin and death, and triumphed over it in Jesus." — Timothy Keller, The Reason for God

Not a story of humanity climbing up to God, but God descending to us. Not self-help, but divine rescue. Not moral improvement, but death and resurrection.

2. Your Story Within God's Story

Your personal narrative isn't separate from God's narrative. It's woven into it. Your redemption story is a particular expression of THE redemption story.

When you were in the swamp, you weren't just struggling with personal sin. You were experiencing the effects of the fall—the brokenness that entered creation when humanity rebelled against God.

When you cried out for help, you weren't just praying for relief. You were participating in the pattern of human cry and divine response that runs throughout Scripture.

When you encountered grace at the water's edge, you weren't just having a personal religious experience. You were meeting the same God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, who led Israel through the Red Sea, who sent His Son to seek and save the lost.

When you died to self and rose in new life, you weren't just turning over a new leaf. You were participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus. United with Him in His death. Raised with Him in His resurrection. A new creation.

Your story matters because it's part of God's story. The specifics are yours—your swamp is different from mine, your water's edge encounter is unique, your rhythms and roots look different than anyone else's. But the pattern is universal. The arc is the same.

Michael Card reminds us:

"We are not the hero of our own story. We live, instead, in God's story." — Michael Card, A Sacred Sorrow

This shift in perspective changes everything. I'm not the protagonist trying to write my own happy ending. I'm a character in a much larger narrative—one written by an Author who knows how to redeem every broken chapter.

3. Nothing Wasted

One of the most powerful promises in the redemption story is this: nothing is wasted.

Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Notice: Paul doesn't say all things are good. They're not. Sin is evil. Suffering is real. Brokenness hurts.

But he does say God works in all things for good. He's taking even the broken pieces—especially the broken pieces—and weaving them into

a story of redemption.

Joseph's story is the perfect illustration. Betrayed by his brothers. Sold into slavery. Falsely accused. Imprisoned. Forgotten.

But God was at work the whole time. And when Joseph finally sees the bigger story, he can say to his brothers: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20).

You intended harm. God intended good.

Not that God caused the harm. But that He redeemed it. He took what was meant for destruction and turned it into salvation.

This is the promise for you: the years you spent in the swamp aren't wasted. God is redeeming them. The pain you experienced isn't meaningless. God is using it. The struggles that nearly broke you are being transformed into testimonies that will strengthen others.

Christine Caine writes:

"Nothing is wasted in the economy of God. Not a tear, not a heartbreak, not a disappointment." — Christine Caine, Undaunted

This isn't wishful thinking—it's the pattern we see throughout Scripture. Every loss, every wound, every seemingly meaningless season becomes raw material for God's redemptive work.

4. Living as Part of the Larger Story

When you grasp that your story is part of God's story, it changes how you live.

You live with purpose. Your life isn't random. You're part of God's redemption project. Every choice matters. Every day has meaning. You're being formed for eternity.

You live with hope. No matter how hard today is, you know the ending. The story doesn't end with suffering. It ends with restoration. Jesus returns. All things are made new. You live in light of that promised future.

You live with perseverance. The struggles you face aren't meaningless. They're part of the redemption arc. God is using them to shape you, refine you, prepare you for the role you'll play in His kingdom.

You live with mission. You're not just receiving redemption. You're participating in it. God redeems you so you can be part of His redemptive work in the world. You bring light into dark places. Hope into despair. Grace into brokenness.

You live with gratitude. When you see the whole arc—creation, fall, redemption, restoration, consummation—you're overwhelmed by grace. You didn't earn this. You didn't deserve it. But God, in His great love, wrote you into His story. Philip Yancey captures the radical nature of grace:

"Grace, like water, flows to the lowest part. Grace is given to the ones who admit they are thirsty, the ones who admit they cannot save themselves." — Philip Yancey, What's So Amazing About Grace?

Grace doesn't wait for us to climb up to it. It flows down to where we actually are—in the low places, the broken places, the places where we've finally stopped pretending we can save ourselves.

Stories of Redemption

The Redemption Promise in Eden (Genesis 3:15)

The moment sin enters the world, God speaks a promise of redemption:

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." — Genesis 3:15

This is the first gospel proclamation—the protoevangelium. Even as God pronounces the curse, He promises redemption. A seed of the woman will come who will crush the serpent's head.

The entire Old Testament is the unfolding of this promise. Through Abraham, through Isaac, through Jacob, through David—the line is preserved. The promise is passed down.

Until finally, in the fullness of time, the Seed comes: Jesus, born of a woman, who crushes the serpent's head at the cross.

Redemption wasn't an afterthought. It was promised from the beginning. John Piper writes:

"The gospel is not a new plan. It is the revelation of God's eternal purpose—the mystery hidden for ages but now revealed." — John Piper, God is the Gospel

Before the foundation of the world, God knew. Before sin entered, redemption was planned. This is the depth of His love.

Joseph's Story (Genesis 37-50)

Joseph's story is one of the clearest pictures of "nothing is wasted" in all of Scripture.

Picture seventeen-year-old Joseph, his father's favorite, wearing the coat of many colors that marks him as special. His brothers hate him for it—hate him for the favoritism, hate him for the dreams he tells about them bowing down to him.

One day they're far from home, tending flocks. Joseph comes to check on them. And they see their chance.

They grab him. Strip off the hated coat. Throw him into an empty cistern—a dry pit in the ground. They sit down to eat lunch while he's

calling for help from the darkness below. Then they sell him to passing traders. Twenty shekels of silver. Their brother, sold like livestock.

Joseph ends up in Egypt as a slave in Potiphar's house. He works his way up, proves himself trustworthy—and Potiphar's wife notices him. She propositions him. He refuses. Day after day, she pursues him. Finally, she grabs his cloak, and when he runs, she uses it as evidence: "He attacked me!"

Joseph goes to prison. An innocent man, imprisoned for doing the right thing. For years, he's there. He interprets dreams for fellow prisoners—the cupbearer and the baker. He asks the cupbearer to remember him when he's released. But the cupbearer forgets. Two more years pass.

Then Pharaoh has a dream. The cupbearer finally remembers Joseph. And Joseph is brought from prison to palace in a single day. He interprets Pharaoh's dream—seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh puts him in charge of preparing Egypt for the coming crisis.

The pit led to Potiphar's house. The prison led to the palace. And ultimately, Joseph's position saves not just Egypt, but his own family—the very brothers who betrayed him—when they come begging for food during the famine.

When his brothers finally recognize him and fear his revenge, Joseph speaks words that capture the heart of redemption:

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20).

What others meant for evil, God meant for good. What looked like wasted years—slavery, false accusation, imprisonment—became the preparation for his purpose.

Nothing—not one moment of suffering—was wasted in God's economy.

Peter's Denial and Restoration (Luke 22:31-32; John 21:15-19)

Earlier that same night, Jesus had warned him: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32).

Peter had protested: "Lord, I'm ready to go with you to prison and to death!" But Jesus knew better: "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me."

Hours later, it happens. Jesus is arrested. Peter follows at a distance to the high priest's courtyard. It's cold. A fire burns in the center. People are gathered around it for warmth. Peter stands with them, trying to blend in, trying to stay close to Jesus without being identified as one of His followers.

A servant girl looks at him in the firelight. "This man was with him."

Peter's response is immediate: "Woman, I don't know him."

A little later, someone else sees him: "You also are one of them."

"Man, I am not!"

About an hour passes. Peter is still there, still trying to remain anonymous. Another person insists: "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean."

Peter replies with emphasis: "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!"

Immediately, while he's still speaking, the rooster crows. And at that moment, Jesus—being led past—turns and looks at Peter. Their eyes meet across the courtyard. And Peter remembers the prediction. He goes outside and weeps bitterly.

The enemy's attack was real. Satan sifted Peter. The denial happened—three times, just as Jesus said it would.

But Jesus' prayer was more powerful than Satan's sifting.

After the resurrection, Jesus finds Peter fishing on the Sea of Galilee. They cook breakfast on the beach. And Jesus restores Peter—three questions mirroring the three denials, three affirmations of love, three commissions to feed His sheep.

"Simon son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

"Feed my lambs."

Three times Jesus asks. Three times Peter answers. Three times Jesus commissions him.

The threefold denial is answered with threefold restoration. The damage is redeemed. The enemy's attack is reversed.

The devil's goal was to destroy Peter. But Jesus' goal was to strengthen him through the trial. And Jesus won.

This is always the pattern: the enemy means it for harm, but God uses it for good. The devil attacks, but Christ restores. The accuser condemns, but the Advocate defends.

Paul's Transformation (Acts 9; 1 Timothy 1:12-16)

Paul's story is violence transformed into mission.

Before his conversion, he's Saul of Tarsus, a rising star among the Pharisees. He's breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He goes to the high priest and asks for letters to the synagogues in Damascus—authorization to hunt down Christians, arrest them, and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains.

He's on fire with religious zeal. He stood there approving when they stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He enters house after house in Jerusalem, dragging men and women off to prison. And now he's taking his campaign on the road.

But on the road to Damascus, about noon, a light from heaven suddenly flashes around him—brighter than the sun. He falls to the ground. And he hears a voice:

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?"

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

The one he's been hunting is hunting him. The one he thought was dead is very much alive. And in that moment, everything Saul thought he knew shatters.

Jesus tells him to go into Damascus and wait for instructions. Saul gets up from the ground, but when he opens his eyes, he can't see. His companions have to lead him by the hand into the city. For three days, he's blind. He doesn't eat. Doesn't drink. Just sits in the darkness, his entire worldview collapsing and rebuilding.

Then Jesus sends a disciple named Ananias to him. Ananias is terrified—he's heard about Saul. But he obeys. He lays hands on Saul, and immediately something like scales falls from Saul's eyes. He can see again. And he's baptized.

The persecutor becomes the apostle. The one who tried to destroy the church becomes the one who builds it across the Roman Empire. The murderer becomes the missionary.

Paul never forgets his past. But he sees it redeemed:

"I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man... But I was shown mercy... so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe." — 1 Timothy 1:13-16

His worst moments become testimonies to God's greatest grace. Nothing wasted.

The Core Scripture Truth

Romans 8:28-30 - "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son... And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

This is the redemption arc applied to individual lives. Let's unpack it:

"In all things God works for the good"

Not some things. All things. Not just the good experiences. All experiences. God is at work in the swamp and at the water's edge, in the dying and in the rising, in the valleys and on the mountains.

This doesn't mean all things are good. They're not. Sin is evil. Suffering is real. Brokenness hurts.

But it does mean God is working in all things. Taking even the broken pieces and weaving them into a story of redemption.

"For the good of those who love him"

The promise is conditional. It's for those who love God—who are in relationship with Him, who trust Him, who have responded to His call.

If you've entered the redemption story—if you've responded to God's call, trusted in Jesus, been brought into the family—then this promise is yours.

God is working all things for your good. Not for your comfort. Not for your ease. But for your ultimate good—conformity to Christ, participation in His kingdom, eternal glory with Him.

"Called... justified... glorified"

Paul traces the redemption arc in three movements:

Called - God pursued you. Spoke to you. Drew you to Himself. Your "yes" wasn't the beginning—God's call was.

Justified - You were declared righteous. Not because you earned it. But because Jesus' righteousness was credited to you. You stand before God forgiven, accepted, beloved—based on Christ's finished work.

Glorified - Past tense. Even though it's future. Why? Because in God's eternal perspective, it's already done. The story is written. The ending is secure.

You will be glorified—fully redeemed, completely restored, eternally with Christ.

This is the theological anchor: your redemption is part of God's eternal purpose. He foreknew you. Predestined you. Called you. Justified you. And He will glorify you.

The story isn't in doubt. The ending is secure.

The Wayfarer Moment

Seeing my story in THE story.

For years, I thought my story was just mine. My struggles. My failures. My small attempts to get it right.

I'd read the Bible as ancient history—good for principles, maybe, but not personally connected to my everyday life.

But then I started to see it.

The pattern of my life—swamp, water's edge, dying, rising, rhythms, roots—wasn't unique to me. It was the redemption arc. The same arc that runs through Scripture from Genesis to Revelation.

I wasn't just struggling with personal sin. I was experiencing the fall.

I wasn't just crying out for help. I was participating in the pattern of cry and divine response that echoes through the Psalms.

I wasn't just encountering grace. I was meeting the same God who met Moses, David, Peter, Paul.

I wasn't just dying to self. I was being united with Christ in His death and resurrection.

My story was part of THE story.

And when I saw that—really saw it—everything changed.

The pain I'd experienced wasn't meaningless. It was part of the redemption arc. God was using it to conform me to Christ's image, to prepare me for the role I'd play in His kingdom.

The waiting seasons weren't wasted. They were necessary parts of the story. Times of preparation. Seasons of root-deepening. Wilderness experiences that would later become testimonies.

The failures I'd carried with shame weren't the end of my story. They were chapters in a larger redemption narrative. Like Peter's denial. Like Paul's persecution. Like Joseph's pit.

God was redeeming them, transforming them into testimonies of grace.

The wayfarer moment came when I stopped seeing my life as disconnected events and started seeing it as a coherent narrative—my story woven into God's story.

I'm not the author. I'm a character. But I'm a beloved character in a story written by a good Author who knows how to turn crucifixions into resurrections.

I don't know how my particular story will unfold. I don't know what chapters are ahead.

But I know the Author. I know the arc. I know the ending.

Creation. Fall. Redemption. Restoration. Consummation.

And I know that in all things—ALL things—God is working for good. Nothing is wasted. Every pain has purpose. Every struggle is part of the redemption arc.

This is THE story. And by grace, it's my story too.

Song Integration

For years, my life felt like disconnected pieces. Random events. Unrelated struggles. Pain here, joy there, failure in one season, growth in another—but no coherent thread tying it all together.

I looked at my story and saw chaos. Mistakes I couldn't undo. Seasons that felt wasted. Suffering that seemed meaningless.

Questions haunted me: Why did that relationship fail? Why did I waste those years in the swamp? Why did God allow that betrayal? What was the point of all that pain?

I was so focused on my own story—my struggles, my failures, my journey—that I'd lost sight of THE story. The grand narrative of redemption that's been unfolding since before the foundation of the world.

The turning point came during a season of deep study. I began to see the Bible not as a collection of disconnected morality tales, but as one coherent story with a single redemption arc.

Creation → Fall → Israel → Incarnation → Cross & Resurrection → Church → Consummation.

And slowly—painfully slowly—I began to see: my story wasn't random. It was part of THE story.

The pain I'd experienced? Part of the redemption arc—God conforming me to Christ's image through suffering.

The waiting seasons? Not wasted, but necessary. Wilderness experiences preparing me for what was ahead.

The failures? Like Peter's denial. Like Paul's persecution. Like Joseph's pit. God was redeeming them, weaving them into a larger narrative of grace.

This song is my attempt to tell THE story. Not just the cross (though the cross is central). The whole story. From creation through consummation. The full redemption arc.

I wanted to trace redemption history chronologically—from "before the stars" through Eden, through the prophets, through Mary's baby boy, through the cross, to the promise of standing before His throne.

And when you see your story within that larger story, everything changes.

Where my life felt chaotic, THE story reveals purpose.

Where my pain felt meaningless, THE story reveals redemption.

Where my failures felt final, THE story reveals resurrection.

I don't know how all the pieces of my story fit together yet. I don't see the full picture.

But I know the Author. I know the arc. I know the ending.

Creation. Fall. Redemption. Restoration. Consummation.

And by grace—scandalous, undeserved, transforming grace—my story is part of THE story.

Lyrics: Redemption Story

[Chorus]

From the beginning, His love was displayed,
Through every fall, His promise stayed.
A Savior's grace, a story divine,
Redemption secured for hearts like mine.

[Verse 1]

Before the stars adorned the night,
Before the sun gave earth its light,
The Word was spoken, creation came,
Through Jesus, the Maker, who knew our name.
He formed the earth, the skies, the seas,
Breathed life into humanity.
From dust we rose, His Spirit's flame,
To bear His image, to praise His name.

[Chorus]

From the beginning, His love was displayed,
Through every fall, His promise stayed.
A Savior's grace, a story divine,
Redemption secured for hearts like mine.

[Verse 2]

In Eden's garden, peace was found,
Until the serpent's lie unbound.

The fruit was taken, the fall began,
Sin entered the hearts of every man.
Yet even then, God's love remained,
A Savior promised to break the chain.
From Adam's sin to grace restored,
A plan of redemption from the Lord.

[Chorus]

From the beginning, His love was displayed,
Through every fall, His promise stayed.
A Savior's grace, a story divine,
Redemption secured for hearts like mine.

[Verse 3]

Through kings and prophets, His voice was heard,
Declaring His truth, His holy word.
David, the shepherd, a king would rise,
Through his line, the Savior arrive.
Isaiah spoke of a suffering King,
Who'd bear our sins and salvation bring.
Elijah's fire, Daniel's stand,
God's faithfulness across the land.

[Chorus]

From the beginning, His love was displayed,
Through every fall, His promise stayed.
A Savior's grace, a story divine,
Redemption secured for hearts like mine.

[Bridge]

Oh, the cross, where mercy flows,
The empty grave, the story shows.
Sin defeated, love prevailed,
Through Christ alone, redemption hailed.
Oh, the cross, where hope is found,
His grace abounds, His love profound.
He bore the weight, the debt was paid,
In Him, the victory's displayed.

[Verse 4]

Mary, chosen, her heart so pure,
Through her, God's love would long endure.
She held the Savior, her baby boy,
The King of kings, her heart's great joy.
Did she know the cross He'd face,
The pain, the nails, the world's disgrace?
Through grief, she trusted, through loss, she prayed,
Believing in the plan God made.

[Verse 5]

The leaders schemed, their hearts grew cold,
Blinded by power, they sought control.
They called Him a blasphemer, sentenced His death,
Yet love endured with His final breath.
Betrayed by a kiss for silver's gleam,
Denied by a friend in a broken dream.
Yet grace would triumph, death undone,
Victory through God's risen Son.

[Verse 6]

To die with Christ, to rise anew,
To walk His path, His love pursue.
The cross became the bridge to grace,
A gift of life in His embrace.
Through history's thread, His story flows,
A love eternal, a truth that grows.
My story now entwined with His,
A song of hope, a life that lives.

[Final Chorus]

From the beginning, His love was displayed,
Through every fall, His promise stayed.

A Savior's grace, a story divine,
Redemption secured for hearts like mine.

[Outro]

His story echoes through all of time,
A Savior's love, so pure, so kind.
One day we'll stand before His throne,
Forever redeemed, forever His own.

Key Takeaways

- **Your story fits within God's Story.** You're not a random accident—you're part of the grand narrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration that spans all history.
- **Nothing in your life is wasted.** Every season, even the painful ones, can be redeemed. God weaves even your failures and wounds into a tapestry of purpose and beauty.
- **You have a redemptive role to play.** Your transformed life becomes part of how God redeems others. Your scars become credentials, your story becomes testimony, your healing becomes hope.
- **The Gospel is THE Story that makes sense of your story.** Understanding the larger biblical narrative helps you see where you fit and why your life matters eternally.

Reflections for the Road

Questions for the Journey:

1. Where do you see your story fitting into the redemption arc?

Look back at your life. Can you identify creation (who you were made to be), fall (your swamp), redemption (your water's edge), and restoration (the journey since then)? Be specific. Write it down using the framework in "Practice: Telling Your Redemption Story" below.

2. Read Romans 8:28-30 slowly.

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose... those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

Where do you see yourself in this redemption arc—called, justified, being glorified? Which stage feels most real to you right now?

3. What parts of your story feel wasted or meaningless?

The years in the swamp? The waiting seasons? The failures you still carry with shame? Name them specifically.

Now read Genesis 50:20 slowly: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good." Can you trust that God is redeeming even those chapters?

4. Whose redemption story gives you hope for yours?

Joseph betrayed by his brothers? Peter denying Jesus? Paul persecuting Christians? Someone you know personally whose story went from brokenness to beauty?

What does their story tell you about your own? How does their testimony strengthen your faith?

5. How will you tell your redemption story to someone this week?

Not the whole thing. Maybe just one part—your swamp, your water's edge moment, or how God is restoring what felt wasted.

Who needs to hear it? Someone still in the swamp? Someone who thinks their story is too broken? Name the person. When will you share it? Make it specific.

Practice: Telling Your Redemption Story

One of the most powerful spiritual practices is learning to tell your redemption story. Here's a framework:

1. Creation - Who you were made to be

Before the swamp. Before the brokenness. Who did God create you to be? What gifts? What longings? What was the original design?

2. Fall - Your swamp

Name it. Be specific. What was your particular experience of brokenness? Don't sugarcoat it. The fall was real. The swamp was deep.

3. Redemption - Your water's edge encounter

When did you meet grace? What was your turning point? How did God pursue you? When did you respond? What changed?

4. Restoration - The journey since then

This is where you are now. Between "already redeemed" and "not yet fully restored." What has God been doing? What rhythms have you learned? What roots have you grown?

5. Consummation - The hope ahead

How does the promise of final restoration shape how you live now? One day, all things will be made new. How does that hope sustain you?

6. Share your story

Your redemption story isn't just for you. It's a testimony of God's faithfulness that can encourage others. Find someone to share it with.

Closing Image

You're standing at the edge of a vast tapestry. So large you can't see the whole thing. So intricate you can't count the threads.

But you can see your section. The part you've been working on. The threads you've been weaving.

From up close, it looks messy. Dark threads mixed with light. Broken places where the pattern seems chaotic.

But then you step back. And you begin to see it.

Your dark threads aren't mistakes. They're part of the design. The broken places aren't flaws. They're contrast that makes the bright threads shine brighter.

You step back further. And you see that your section connects to other sections. Your story is woven into other stories. The threads intertwine.

This isn't just your tapestry. It's part of something much larger.

And though you still can't see the whole tapestry, you begin to glimpse the scope. It stretches back before you can see—to creation, to Eden, to the beginning of all things. And it stretches forward beyond your vision—to restoration, to the New Jerusalem, to eternity.

This is THE tapestry. The redemption story. God's grand narrative into which every smaller story is woven.

And your threads—every joy and sorrow, every triumph and failure, every moment of grace and every season of struggle—are woven into the larger design.

Nothing is wasted. Nothing is random. Everything is part of the pattern.

One day—when the tapestry is complete, when the final thread is woven, when Jesus returns and all things are made new—you'll see it.

The whole story. From creation to consummation. Every thread in its place. Every pattern intentional.

And you'll see your story woven perfectly into His story.

This is redemption's story. From the beginning, His love was displayed. Through every fall, His promise stayed.

And the story isn't finished. He's still weaving. Still making all things new. Still writing the redemption narrative that will one day culminate in complete restoration.

You're part of that story. A beloved participant in God's grand project to redeem and restore all of creation.

Forever redeemed. Forever His own.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 12)

MOVEMENT 3: UNFORCED RHYTHMS OF LIFE (The Transformation)

Chapter 12: Nothing is Wasted

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." — Romans 8:28

Nothing is Wasted

Listen at: <http://go.skylertthomas.com/smBjeW>



Scan to listen: Nothing is Wasted

An Invitation to Believe the Impossible

You've come through eleven chapters. You've seen your story within God's story. You've discovered purpose, rhythm, depth.

But now I need to ask you the hardest question yet:

When you look back at your life—really look back—what do you see?

Be honest. Do you see years in that toxic relationship? The job you stayed at too long because you were too afraid to leave? The ministry that blew up spectacularly? The friendships you let die because you were too proud? The opportunities you missed?

When you look back, do you see a timeline full of black holes? Years where nothing good grew. Nothing valuable was learned. Just... waste?

Here's the question that haunts many of us: *Can God really redeem this? Or are some things just... lost?*

The enemy whispers: "Those years are gone. That potential is wasted. Those relationships are dead. You can't get it back. It's too late."

But here's what I've discovered, and it's the most scandalous promise in Scripture:

In God's economy, nothing is wasted. Not "almost nothing." Not "most things." Nothing.

Every tear. Every failure. Every lost year. Every broken relationship. Every season you wish you could erase—God can redeem it all.

This doesn't mean the pain wasn't real. It doesn't mean the consequences don't matter. It doesn't minimize the loss.

It means God specializes in turning crucifixions into resurrections. He takes what looks like absolute waste and transforms it into raw material for redemption.

This chapter is about believing the impossible: that the years you thought were lost have been woven into a larger story of

transformation.

That nothing—absolutely nothing—is wasted in His hands.

So before you continue, pause. This is hard to believe. I know. Consider:

Can you say, even with doubt mixed in: "God, I don't see how You can redeem those years. But I'm willing to believe You can. I'm willing to trust that even the seasons I wish I could erase are being woven into something purposeful. Show me how nothing is wasted."

That's the prayer that opens eyes to redemption.

Because what comes next isn't just theological theory. It's the scandalous truth that changes how you see your entire timeline.

Let's be brutally honest about what waste feels like. Because if you've looked back at your timeline and seen black holes, you know this geography intimately.

Waste feels like:

- **Time you can never recover.** Years spent in patterns that brought nothing but destruction.
- **Potential squandered.** The person you could have become if you'd made different choices.
- **Relationships damaged beyond repair.** Bridges burned. Trust shattered. No going back.
- **Opportunities missed.** Doors that closed while you were too paralyzed to walk through them.
- **Lessons learned too late.** Wisdom that came after the damage was already done.

This isn't just regret. Regret is "I wish I'd done that differently." Waste is "That season contributed nothing. It's just gone."

And the question that haunts you: *Can God really redeem this? Or are some things just... lost?*

The enemy whispers: "Those years are gone. That potential is wasted. Those relationships are dead. You can't get it back. It's too late."

But grace whispers something different: "In God's economy, nothing is wasted. Not 'almost nothing.' Not 'most things.' Nothing."

Every tear. Every failure. Every lost year. Every broken relationship. Every season you wish you could erase—God can redeem it all.

This doesn't mean the pain wasn't real. It doesn't mean the consequences don't matter. It doesn't minimize the loss.

It means God specializes in turning crucifixions into resurrections. He takes what looks like absolute waste and transforms it into raw material for redemption.

This is the scandalous promise: nothing—absolutely nothing—is wasted in His hands.

Key Themes

1. Timeline Reflection: The Sacred Work of Looking Back

Part of believing nothing is wasted is doing the hard work of timeline reflection. Not to dwell in the past, but to understand how the past has shaped the present.

This isn't nostalgia. It's not rumination. It's the intentional practice of asking:

- What moments brought joy?
- What moments brought pain?

- What patterns emerged?
- Where was grace at work even when I couldn't see it?

I've done this exercise multiple times over the years. Drew my timeline. Marked the major seasons—the joyful ones and the painful ones. The seasons of growth and the seasons of wandering.

And every time, I discover the same thing: grace was present even when I couldn't feel it. God was working even when I couldn't see it.

The years I thought were wasted? They taught me what I couldn't learn anywhere else. My desperate need for grace. Compassion for others who struggle. The cost of pride and the beauty of humility.

Even the wasted years became the very years that prepared me for the work I'm doing now.

Timeline reflection requires courage. It means looking honestly at seasons you'd rather forget. But it also reveals something profound: grace threads through every season. Even the dark ones.

The thread of redemption. The thread that says: nothing is wasted.

2. Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah: The Test That Reveals

The story in Genesis 22 is one of the most challenging in all of Scripture. God asks Abraham to offer his son Isaac—the son of promise, the one through whom all nations would be blessed—as a sacrifice.

Abraham obeys. He takes Isaac up Mount Moriah. He builds the altar. He binds his son. He raises the knife.

And God provides a ram in the thicket. Isaac is spared. The promise is preserved.

"Abraham named the place Yahweh-Yireh (which means 'the LORD will provide'). To this day, people still use that

name as a proverb: 'On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.' — Genesis 22:14 (NLT)

What could have been the most tragic waste—the death of the promised son—becomes instead a revelation of God's character. The Lord provides. Always. Even when it seems impossible.

This is the promise for you: God specializes in last-minute provision. In eleventh-hour intervention. In turning what looks like absolute waste into absolute redemption.

The test itself wasn't wasted. The fear wasn't wasted. The faith required to obey wasn't wasted.

All of it became part of the story that would be told for generations: on the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided.

And in your life, the seasons that felt like tests—the moments when you had to let go of what you loved most, when you had to trust God with impossible outcomes—those weren't wasted either.

They were the ground where provision came. Where faith grew. Where you learned that God really does provide.

3. Romans 8:28 Rightly Understood

Perhaps no verse is more quoted—and more misunderstood—than Romans 8:28:

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

This doesn't mean everything that happens is good. It doesn't mean God causes evil so good can result. It doesn't mean we should minimize pain by slapping a spiritual Band-Aid on it.

What it does mean is this: God is relentlessly committed to redeeming every moment of your story. Even the worst ones. Even the ones that feel utterly wasted.

God is at work, weaving them into something good.

Not always good you can see in the moment. Sometimes not good you'll see in this lifetime. But good nonetheless. Eternal good. The kind of good that redeems every wasted season and makes it count for eternity.

I held this verse at arm's length for years. Because it felt like a platitude. Like minimizing real pain with Christian clichés.

But it's not a platitude. It's a promise. A promise that your pain has purpose. Your suffering isn't random. Your struggles aren't wasted.

God is working—actively, intentionally, lovingly—to bring good from it all.

"God wastes nothing—not even sin. The soul that has struggled and come through is enriched by its struggle, and the grace of God is not frustrated." — Evelyn Underhill, The Spiritual Life

4. Suffering to Compassion: The Transformation

One of the most profound ways God ensures nothing is wasted is by transforming our suffering into compassion. What once wounded us becomes the very thing that equips us to heal others.

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God." — 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Your pain isn't wasted when it becomes the bridge to someone else's healing.

Your struggle isn't wasted when it becomes the testimony that gives someone else hope.

Your scars aren't wasted when they become the proof that wounds can heal.

I've seen this in my own life. The years I spent in the swamp? They weren't wasted. Because now when someone else is drowning, I can sit with them in the muck and say, "I've been here. I know this place. And there's a way out."

The toxic relationships I stayed in too long? They taught me about codependency, about people-pleasing, about the cost of losing yourself. And now I can help others recognize those patterns before the damage goes as deep.

The ministry position that blew up? It taught me about burnout, about the danger of deriving identity from what you do instead of who you are. And now I can warn others away from that cliff.

Nothing is wasted because every experience—even the painful ones—can become a gift to others.

The years you thought were lost become the very years that qualify you to speak into someone else's lostness.

The seasons you thought were wasted become the seasons that prepare you for kingdom work.

5. Counting the Cost: Present and Future

Timeline reflection looks backward. But the work of "nothing is wasted" also requires looking forward—counting the cost of present choices.

This isn't just about past choices and their consequences. It's about present ones.

What kind of life do I want to live now? What brings me life? What drains me? Am I pursuing what's actually fulfilling, or just what's familiar?

These questions themselves are grace—invitations to live more intentionally, more authentically, more aligned with who God is calling you to become.

Counting the cost means asking: If my future self could speak to me today, what would they want me to know? What choices would they be grateful I made? What patterns would they wish I'd broken sooner?

This isn't anxiety about the future. It's wisdom. It's stewarding today in light of tomorrow. It's believing that even this moment—this choice, this breath, this step—matters eternally.

Nothing wasted means: this day counts. This conversation counts. This choice counts. Because God is redeeming not just your past, but your present and future too.

Stories of Redemption

Joseph: From Pit to Palace (Genesis 37-50)

Joseph's story is one of the clearest pictures of "nothing is wasted" in all of Scripture.

Betrayed by his brothers. Sold into slavery. Falsely accused. Imprisoned. For years, it looked like total waste.

But God was weaving a story of redemption. The pit led to Potiphar's house. Prison led to the palace. And ultimately, Joseph's suffering positioned him to save not just Egypt, but his own family—the very ones who betrayed him.

His words to his brothers capture the heart of "nothing is wasted":

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." — Genesis 50:20

What others meant for evil, God meant for good.

Not that God caused the harm. But that He redeemed it. He took what was meant for destruction and turned it into salvation.

Nothing was wasted—not the betrayal, not the slavery, not the false accusations, not the imprisonment. All of it was being woven into a story of redemption.

The Cross: Ultimate Redemption of Waste (Luke 23:33-43)

If you want to see God's power to redeem waste, look at the cross.

The most brutal, degrading, seemingly wasteful death imaginable. A young rabbi, full of potential, executed as a common criminal. Three years of ministry, ended. Disciples scattered. Hope crushed.

Wasted. That's what it looked like.

But that's not what it was. The cross wasn't waste—it was the hinge of history. The moment when all waste, all sin, all brokenness was gathered up and transformed.

"Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." — Colossians 2:15

Death swallowed up in victory. The grave robbed of its power.

If God can redeem the cross—if He can take the most wasteful, brutal death and make it the source of eternal life—then nothing in your life is beyond His redemptive reach.

No season is too wasted. No pain is too great. No loss is too final.

In God's economy, nothing is wasted. Not even death itself.

The Wasteland Restored (Joel 2:25-27)

After devastating judgment—locusts that destroyed everything—God makes a promise:

"I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm... You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you." — Joel 2:25-26

The years the locusts have eaten. The wasted years. The seasons of devastation and loss.

God doesn't just stop the locusts. He repays. He restores. He redeems the wasted years.

This is the promise: no season is so wasted that God can't redeem it. The years you think are lost—God will restore them. Not by turning back time. But by redeeming what was, transforming it, using it for His purposes.

The Core Scripture Truth

Genesis 22:14 - "So Abraham called the name of that place, 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'"

Romans 8:28 - "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

These two passages—separated by centuries—speak the same truth: God is in the business of redemption. Of provision. Of ensuring that nothing is wasted in His hands.

Genesis 22 shows us God's character: He is the God who provides. Even when the test is unbearable. Even when obedience seems to contradict the promise. Even at the last possible moment. God provides.

Romans 8 shows us God's commitment: He works all things—not some things, but all things—for the good of those who love Him.

This isn't wishful thinking. It's covenant faithfulness. God has bound Himself to redeem your story, no matter how broken the chapters.

Together, these passages form the theological foundation for believing nothing is wasted:

God's provision is certain. On the mountain of the Lord—in your darkest moments, your most desperate situations—provision will be made. It may not come when you expect. It may not look like you imagined. But it will come.

God's redemption is comprehensive. All things. Not just the good things. Not just the spiritual things. All things. Every moment, every experience, every pain, every struggle—God is working it for good.

This doesn't mean the pain wasn't real. It doesn't mean the waste didn't hurt.

It means God specializes in turning waste into wonder. Ashes into beauty. Mourning into dancing.

In the economy of God, nothing is wasted. Each tear, each failure, each loss becomes an opportunity for grace.

The Wayfarer Moment

The shift from regret to redemption doesn't happen all at once. It happens one memory at a time.

For years, I carried a deep sense of regret. Time wasted. Opportunities missed. Relationships broken. Years spent in patterns that brought nothing but pain.

I would look back and see waste. Just waste. And the weight of it was crushing.

But slowly—so slowly—I began to see differently. Not because the facts changed. But because my understanding of God's character deepened.

I started to ask different questions. Not "Why did I waste so much time?" but "Where was grace at work even when I couldn't see it?"

And the answers surprised me.

The years in the swamp taught me what I couldn't learn anywhere else: my desperate need for grace.

The mistakes taught me compassion for others who struggle.

The broken relationships taught me the cost of pride and the beauty of humility.

Even the wasted years became the very years that prepared me for the work I'm doing now.

Nothing was wasted. Not because I deserved redemption. But because God specializes in it.

I began doing timeline work—intentionally looking back at my life and tracing the thread of grace through every season. The joyful seasons and the painful ones. The seasons of growth and the seasons of wandering.

And in every season, I found the same thing: God was there. Working. Weaving. Redeeming.

This didn't erase the pain. It didn't undo the consequences. But it reframed the story.

What looked like waste became raw material for transformation.

What felt like lost years became the very years that made me who I am.

I'm learning to live from this truth: in the economy of God, nothing is wasted. Not the struggles. Not the failures. Not even the years I spent running from Him.

All of it—every moment, every tear, every broken piece—God is redeeming. Repurposing. Transforming into something eternally valuable.

And if God can redeem my wasteland, He can redeem yours too.

Song Integration

My therapist laid out the timeline of my life across the table and asked, "Do you see the thread?"

I didn't. All I saw were the wasted years.

We'd been doing timeline work for weeks—mapping my life in seasons, marking the joyful ones and the painful ones, tracing the patterns of growth and wandering.

And I kept coming back to the same question: "Were those years wasted?"

The years in toxic relationships. The job I stayed at too long. The ministry that blew up. The friendships that died. The opportunities I missed.

Were they wasted?

My first answer was always yes. Those years contributed nothing. They're just gone.

But as I sat with it—as I traced the thread of grace through even the darkest seasons—I started to see something different.

The toxic relationships taught me about boundaries, about self-worth, about the danger of deriving identity from someone else.

The job I stayed at too long taught me resilience, taught me what I don't want, taught me to recognize when it's time to leave.

The ministry that blew up taught me about burnout, about the cost of performance-based faith, about God's grace when everything falls apart.

None of it was wasted. All of it was being redeemed.

The song poured out as a declaration: "You will provide. You always do. Even when I walk through fire, You stay in the flame."

Not because the fire isn't real. Not because it doesn't hurt. But because God doesn't waste it. He uses it. Redeems it. Transforms it.

The chorus became my theology: "In the economy of Your love, nothing is wasted."

Not "almost nothing." Nothing.

Every tear. Every failure. Every lost year. God is weaving it into redemption.

Lyrics: Nothing is Wasted

[Verse 1]

You asked me to let go of what I held too tight

The plans I made, the dreams I shaped, the pieces of my life

I tried to hold it all together, afraid of what I'd lose

But love means laying down the outcome

And trusting everything to You

[Chorus]

You will provide, You always do
Even when I don't know what You're leading me through
Even when I walk through fire, You stay in the flame
You hold my sorrow, You know my name
In the valley, in the waiting, I have tasted
In the economy of Your love, nothing is wasted

[Verse 2]

I've walked through days that felt like silence
And nights I couldn't catch my breath
I said I'd follow where You led me
But I was scared of what came next
I couldn't see beyond the moment
Still You whispered, "I am near"
You never promised all the answers
You only asked me not to fear

[Chorus]

You will provide, You always do
Even when I don't know what You're leading me through
Even when I walk through fire, You stay in the flame
You hold my sorrow, You know my name
In the valley, in the waiting, I have tasted
In the economy of Your love, nothing is wasted

[Verse 3]

So here I am with hands wide open
Letting go of what I thought was mine
You never asked me for perfection
Just a heart that says, "I'll try"
And in the breaking, I found healing
In the loss, I found Your grace
You're the God who turns my ashes
Into beauty I can't replace

[Bridge]

You don't waste the waiting, You don't waste the pain
Even when I'm walking through fire or rain
Every breath I breathe, every pain I've tasted
In the economy of Your love, nothing is wasted

[Final Chorus]

You will provide, You always do
Even when I'm breaking in two
Even when I walk through fire, You stay in the flame
You never leave me alone in the pain
In the valley, in the waiting, I have tasted
In the economy of Your love, nothing is wasted

[Outro]

So I lay it down again
Even when I don't understand
You are good... and nothing is wasted
You are near when I let go
You are strong when I feel low
You are kind... and nothing is wasted
You've seen every tear I've cried
Held my heart when hope had died
You stayed... and nothing is wasted
So I'll trust You in the silence
I'll believe You through the dark
You are faithful in the waiting
You are healing every part
I won't fear what comes tomorrow
I won't chase what's not mine to hold
You are God... and nothing is wasted

Key Takeaways

• **God redeems every wasted season.** Romans 8:28 promises that God works ALL things—not just good things—together for good for those who love Him. Your painful past isn't disqualified; it's raw material for redemption.

- **Suffering can birth compassion.** The pain you've walked through equips you to comfort others in similar struggles. Your wounds become the very thing that allows you to reach people no one else can.
- **Count the cost, then trust the process.** Following Jesus requires sacrifice, but what you gain far outweighs what you give up. The pearl of great price is worth selling everything else.
- **Jehovah Jireh—God provides.** Just as He provided a ram for Abraham when Isaac was on the altar, God provides what you need at the exact moment you need it. Trust His timing, not your anxiety.

Reflections for the Road

Questions for the Journey:

- What season of your life feels most "wasted"? Name it. Where do you carry the most regret?
- Do timeline work: Map your life in seasons. Mark the major ones—joyful and painful. Where do you see patterns? Where do you see the thread of grace?
- What suffering in your life might God want to transform into compassion for others? Where have you been wounded? How might that pain become the bridge to someone else's healing?
- Read Genesis 22 and Romans 8:28 slowly. What is God saying to you about provision and redemption?

Practice: The Timeline Exercise

Here's how to do timeline work:

1. Draw your timeline

On a large piece of paper, draw a horizontal line representing your life from birth to now. Mark major life events.

2. Mark the spiritual seasons

Using different colors, mark seasons of growth, wandering, suffering, joy. Be honest. Don't spiritualize everything.

3. Look for the thread of grace

Go back over your timeline and look for moments of grace—even in the hardest seasons. Where did God show up? Use another color to mark these moments.

4. Name what you're learning

For each major season, write a one-sentence summary of what you learned or how you grew. Even the painful seasons. Even the "wasted" years.

5. Write a prayer of redemption

End by asking God to redeem every season. To use even the wasted years for His glory and your good.

Closing Image

You're standing on the mountain now. Not Mount Moriah exactly, but your own mountain. The place where you've laid down what you held most dear.

And as you look back down the mountain at the path you've climbed, you see something you missed on the way up.

Every step—even the ones that felt like backsliding. Every turn—even the wrong ones. Every season—even the wasted ones. They all led here.

Nothing was wasted.

Not the swamp. Not the struggle. Not the years of wandering. All of it—every single moment—was woven into the tapestry of your story. A tapestry of redemption.

You can see the ram in the thicket now. The provision that came at just the right moment. Not when you expected. Not how you imagined. But exactly when and how it was needed.

And you understand: this is who God is. The God who provides. The God who redeems. The God who ensures that in His economy, nothing is ever wasted.

You whisper the words that Abraham whispered centuries ago: "On the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided."

And you know—deep in your bones, deeper than doubt, deeper than regret—it's true.

God has provided. God is providing. God will provide.

And because of that, nothing you've experienced, nothing you've suffered, nothing you've lost is wasted.

It's all raw material for redemption. All part of the story. All woven into the unforced rhythms of grace.

Nothing is wasted.

On the mountain of the Lord, provision is made.

And in the economy of God, nothing—absolutely nothing—is wasted.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 13)

MOVEMENT 3: UNFORCED RHYTHMS OF LIFE (The Transformation)

Chapter 13: Devil's On The Run

"Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." — Colossians 2:15

Devil's On The Run

Listen at: <http://go.skylertthomas.com/xSXwkH>



Scan to listen: Devil's On The Run

An Invitation to Stand

You've walked through twelve chapters. You've experienced rescue, rhythm, depth, redemption. You've discovered that nothing is wasted.

But now I need to ask you something crucial:

When the accusations come at 3 AM—when they feel true—do you know where you're standing?

You know these voices. They always show up in the dark, in the quiet, when you're too tired to fight back effectively:

You're not really forgiven. God's still angry. You've failed too many times. You'll never be free. This sin is too big.

And here's what makes it so hard: sometimes it feels like all the progress you've made is fragile. One accusation away from crumbling.

The enemy whispers: *See? You haven't really changed. This is who you are. This is who you'll always be.*

But here's what I've discovered, and it's the truth that changes the battle:

This isn't a fight for victory. It's a fight from victory.

The war is already over. The enemy has already been defeated. You're not fighting to win—you're enforcing the win that's already been won.

Colossians 2:15 says: "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

Disarmed. Public spectacle. Triumphed.

Past tense. Done. Finished.

This chapter is about the fundamental shift from desperate warfare to confident standing. From fighting for freedom to standing in freedom. From resisting from fear to resisting from rest.

The devil is on the run. Not because you're strong. Because Christ is victorious.

And you—standing in Christ's victory—don't have to earn freedom. You just have to stand in the freedom that's already yours.

So before you continue, pause. Consider:

Can you say, even when the accusations feel true: "Jesus, the cross. The cross settles this. I'm not fighting for victory—I'm standing in victory. The enemy is defeated. I resist from rest, and he flees."

That's the declaration that shifts the battle.

Because what comes next isn't about fighting harder. It's about standing firmer.

Let's be honest about what spiritual warfare feels like. Because if you've been in the fight, you know it's not theoretical. It's visceral.

Spiritual warfare feels like:

- **Accusations that feel true.** "You're not really forgiven. God's still angry. You've failed too many times."
- **Temptations perfectly tailored to your weaknesses.** The enemy knows where you're vulnerable.
- **Despair that whispers "give up."** What's the point? You'll never change. This is who you are.
- **Isolation.** The lie that you're alone. That no one else struggles like this. That if people knew, they'd reject you.
- **Confusion.** Feeling like you can't tell God's voice from the enemy's lies from your own thoughts.

But here's the shift: spiritual warfare from victory feels different.

When you're fighting from victory instead of for victory, the battle changes:

- **Accusations lose their power.** Not because they stop coming, but because you know they're lies. The cross settles it.
- **Temptations don't define you.** You're not your struggles. You're beloved. The temptation is an attack, not an identity.
- **Despair has no ground.** Hope is anchored in Christ's finished work, not your performance.
- **Isolation breaks.** You're part of a body. Connected. Not alone.
- **Truth becomes clear.** God's voice sounds like grace. The enemy's voice sounds like accusation. And you're learning the difference.

The battlefield is still real. The enemy still attacks. But you're not desperately fighting for freedom anymore.

You're standing in freedom. Enforcing victory. Resisting from rest.

Key Themes

1. Fighting From Victory, Not For Victory

This is the fundamental shift. And it changes everything.

When you're fighting for victory, every battle feels desperate. Every temptation is a potential defeat. Every accusation carries the weight of judgment. You're trying to earn something, prove something, secure something through your effort.

But when you're fighting from victory, the pressure's off. You're not trying to earn freedom—you're protecting freedom that's already yours. You're not hoping to overcome—you're standing in the overcoming power of Christ.

James 4:7: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

Notice what it doesn't say. It doesn't say "fight the devil until you're exhausted, and maybe he'll leave."

It says resist, and he will flee. Automatic. Guaranteed. The fleeing isn't something you make happen—it's the result of your positioning.

You resist, and he runs. Every time.

Why? Because he's already defeated. And he knows it.

You're not fighting to win. Christ won. You're enforcing that win. Standing in that victory. And when you do, the enemy has no choice but to flee.

C.S. Lewis explains the Christian's unique position:

"The Christian is in a different position from other people who are trying to be good. They hope, by being good, to please God if there is one; or—if they think there is not—at least they hope to deserve approval from good men. But the Christian thinks any good he does comes from the Christ-life inside him." — C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

We're not fighting in our own strength. We're fighting from Christ's strength already at work in us.

2. The Lies of the Enemy vs. The Truth of Grace

The devil's primary weapon isn't force—it's deception. He can't take your salvation. He can't reverse what Christ has done. But he can lie to you about it.

And if he can get you to believe the lies, he can render you ineffective.

His strategy is always the same: make you doubt who you are in Christ.

"You're not really forgiven."

"God is still angry with you."

"You've failed too many times."

"You'll never be free."

"This sin is too big for grace."

Lies. All of them. But lies that feel true when you're in the swamp, when you're struggling, when you can't see clearly.

The antidote is truth. Not just knowing it intellectually, but anchoring your identity in it.

You are forgiven—completely, fully, eternally:

*"But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness."
— 1 John 1:9 (NLT)*

God is not angry with you—His wrath was satisfied at the cross:

"Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us." — Romans 5:1 (NLT)

Your failures don't define you—Christ's righteousness does:

"For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ." — 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NLT)

You are free—the chains are broken, the prison door is open (John 8:36).

No sin is too big for grace—grace is bigger than all of them combined (Romans 5:20).

When you stand in these truths, the lies lose their power. The accusations fall flat. The enemy has nothing to work with.

Because truth always defeats lies. And grace always trumps accusation.

A.W. Tozer offers a sobering reminder:

"The devil is a better theologian than any of us and is a devil still." — A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*

The enemy knows Scripture. He knows theology. But knowledge without submission is worthless. We don't defeat him with superior arguments—we defeat him by standing in the truth of who we are in Christ.

3. Colossians 2:15 – The Public Spectacle

One of the most powerful verses about spiritual warfare is Colossians 2:15:

"And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

This is the picture: Jesus on the cross, seemingly defeated. The enemy celebrating. But in that moment of apparent defeat, Jesus is actually stripping the enemy of every weapon, every claim, every authority.

And then—resurrection. The ultimate reversal. Death swallowed up in victory. The grave defeated. Satan disarmed. A public spectacle made of all the powers of darkness.

Disarmed. Every weapon the enemy had—sin, death, condemnation, accusation—was stripped away. He has no legitimate claim. No legal ground. No authority.

Public spectacle. The victory wasn't secret or private. It was public. Visible. Undeniable. The powers of darkness were put on display—defeated, humiliated, powerless.

Triumphing. This is the language of a victory parade. Jesus didn't just win—He celebrated. The cross wasn't Plan B. It was the plan. And it

worked perfectly.

This is why the devil is on the run. He has no authority anymore. His power was stripped at the cross. His claims were nullified in the resurrection. All he has left are lies and fear—and both crumble in the presence of truth and faith.

Charles Stanley identifies the enemy's real strategy:

"Satan's primary objective is not to lead you into a blatant sin. It's to get you to live independently of God." — Charles Stanley, When the Enemy Strikes

This is the core battle. Not spectacular moral failures, but subtle independence. Living like you don't need God. Making decisions without Him. Trusting yourself instead of Him. This is where the real warfare happens.

4. The Danger of Giving the Enemy Too Much Credit

There's a danger on the other side of spiritual warfare: giving the devil too much credit. Making him seem more powerful than he is. Living in constant fear of his schemes.

But the truth is, the devil is a defeated foe. He's on a leash. His time is limited. His power is broken. And he has no authority over those who are in Christ.

This doesn't mean we ignore spiritual warfare. It means we engage it from the right posture—not fear, but confidence. Not paranoia, but awareness. Not obsession with the enemy, but focus on Christ.

Some Christians see a demon behind every bush. Others deny the reality of spiritual warfare altogether. The truth is in the middle: the enemy is real, but he's already defeated.

We need to be aware, but not afraid. Alert, but not anxious. Resisting, but resting in Christ's victory.

The devil is on the run. That's the truth. But don't spend your life looking over your shoulder for him.

Keep your eyes on Jesus. Stand firm in truth. And when the enemy shows up with his lies and accusations, resist him with confidence—knowing that he has no choice but to flee.

5. Walking in Freedom, Not Just Fighting for It

The ultimate goal of understanding spiritual warfare isn't just to fight better—it's to walk in freedom. To live in the victory that Christ has won. To stop constantly battling and start consistently abiding.

Too many Christians spend their entire lives in spiritual warfare mode—always fighting, always resisting, always on guard. And while vigilance is important, it's not the whole picture.

The whole picture is this: Christ has set you free. The chains are broken. The prison door is open. The devil is defeated.

Your job isn't to keep fighting for that freedom. It's to walk in it. To live from it. To let it shape how you think, how you respond, how you engage with life.

Galatians 5:1: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

Stand firm in freedom. Don't go back to slavery. Don't pick up chains that Christ has already broken. Don't believe lies that Christ has already exposed as false.

The devil is on the run. And you're free to live like it.

Stories of Spiritual Warfare

Jesus' Temptation in the Wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11)

Forty days. Forty nights. No food. No shelter. Just Jesus, alone in the wilderness—a barren landscape of stone and sand, scorching heat by day, bitter cold by night. The same wilderness where Israel wandered for forty years. The same kind of testing ground where God's people failed again and again.

Jesus is hungry. Not the kind of hunger you feel when you skip lunch. The kind that makes your stomach cramp, your head swim, your vision blur. His body is screaming for food. Every stone looks like bread. And that's exactly when the enemy shows up.

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."

If. That word is a knife. The Father just spoke at Jesus' baptism: "This is my beloved Son." But now the devil plants doubt: *If* you are... *If* God really loves you, why are you starving? *If* you're really His Son, why doesn't He provide? Prove it. Use your power. Take care of yourself.

Jesus' response cuts through the fog of hunger with clarity: "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

The second test shifts location—suddenly they're at the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem, hundreds of feet above the ground. People below look like ants. The drop is dizzying.

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the temple."

Again, *if*. But this time the devil quotes Scripture—Psalm 91, God's promise of protection. See? God will catch you. He has to. It's promised. Test it. Prove it. Force God's hand.

Jesus doesn't flinch: "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

The third temptation is the most brazen. The devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in an instant—their wealth, their power, their glory. Everything Jesus came to redeem, offered as a shortcut.

"All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me."

No more *if*. Now it's a straight-up offer: Skip the cross. Avoid the suffering. Take the kingdom now. Just bow.

Jesus' final response is sharp, decisive: "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

And the devil left. Fled. Ran.

This is the pattern for every believer. The enemy will attack your identity in Christ. He'll offer shortcuts. He'll tempt you to doubt God's promises.

Your response? Stand on truth. Speak Scripture. Resist with confidence.

And he will flee. Just like he fled from Jesus.

Peter Sinking (Matthew 14:22-33)

The storm hits in the middle of the night. Wind howling. Waves crashing over the bow. The disciples are straining at the oars, trying to keep the boat from capsizing. They're experienced fishermen—they've been through storms before. But this one is different. Relentless. Exhausting. And Jesus isn't with them.

Then, in the pre-dawn darkness, they see something impossible: a figure walking on the water. Their first reaction isn't faith—it's terror. "It's a ghost!" But then they hear His voice cutting through the wind: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

Peter, impulsive as always, shouts back: "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come."

One word. One invitation. And Peter—reckless, passionate Peter—climbs over the side of the boat. His foot touches the surface. And it holds. He takes another step. Still holding. He's walking on

water. Actually walking on water.

For a few glorious moments, Peter is doing the impossible. Eyes locked on Jesus. Faith overriding physics.

Then he notices the wind. Feels the spray of the waves hitting his legs. Hears the roar of the storm around him. His brain catches up with what he's doing—*I'm standing on water, this is insane, I'm going to drown*—and the moment he shifts his focus from Jesus to the circumstances, he starts to sink.

Not slowly. Fast. Water up to his knees, his waist, his chest. Panic floods in.

And he cries out: "Lord, save me!"

Three words. Not a theological treatise. Not a confession of unworthiness. Not an apology for his lack of faith. Just a desperate, drowning cry.

And immediately—not after Peter proved himself, not after Peter had a better attitude, not after Peter pulled himself together and deserved it—immediately, Jesus reached out His hand and caught him.

That's the pattern. Not "get yourself together and then call on Jesus." But "call on Jesus from the middle of your sinking."

The enemy wants you to think you have to fix yourself before God will help you. But Jesus reaches out immediately when you cry out.

"We are not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be." — C.S. Lewis, Letters to Malcolm

The Fall of Satan (Revelation 12:7-12)

Picture the scene: war breaks out in heaven. Not a skirmish. Not a disagreement. War. Michael and his angels arrayed against the dragon and his forces. The ancient serpent, the one who deceived Eve in the garden, the accuser who has stood before God's throne day and night

bringing charges against His people—he thought he could win.

But he couldn't. "He was not strong enough."

"Then war broke out in heaven... But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan... The accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down." — Revelation 12:7-10

Not escorted out. Not gently removed. Hurling. Thrown down like a defeated enemy. The one who claimed to be like God, the one who promised Eve she could be like God, the one who has been accusing God's children for millennia—cast out. Expelled. Defeated.

And the response of heaven? Not relief. Not cautious celebration. A victory shout: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah!"

The accuser is cast down. His accusations no longer stand. His authority is revoked. His place in heaven is gone. The victory is complete, cosmic, irreversible.

And the call to believers?

"They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." — Revelation 12:11

You overcome by the blood of the Lamb (Christ's finished work) and the word of your testimony (standing in truth).

Christ's victory + your faith = the devil on the run.

The Core Scripture Truth

Colossians 2:13-15 - "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them

by the cross."

The cross is the turning point of all spiritual warfare. What looked like defeat was actually the decisive victory.

Jesus didn't just survive the enemy's attack—He dismantled it.

Disarmed. Every weapon the enemy had—sin, death, condemnation, accusation—was stripped away. He has no legitimate claim. No legal ground. No authority.

Public spectacle. The victory wasn't secret or private. It was public. Visible. Undeniable. The powers of darkness were put on display—defeated, humiliated, powerless.

Triumphing. This is the language of a victory parade. Jesus didn't just win—He celebrated. The cross wasn't Plan B. It was the plan. And it worked perfectly.

This is the theological foundation for "the devil is on the run." Not wishful thinking. Not positive confession. Not spiritual bravado.

Reality. Accomplished fact. The cross changed everything.

Ephesians 6:10-11: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes."

Notice: you're strong in the Lord, not in yourself. The armor is God's armor, not your own. And the call is to stand, not to fight for ground you don't have.

You're holding ground that's already been won. Standing in victory that's already been secured. Resisting an enemy who's already been defeated.

This is spiritual warfare from rest. From confidence. From the unforced rhythms of grace.

The devil is on the run. Not because you're strong, but because Christ is victorious.

And in Him, you share that victory.

The Wayfarer Moment

The shift from fighting for victory to fighting from victory changed everything for me.

For years, I felt like I was barely holding on. Every temptation was a potential defeat. Every accusation felt true. Every battle left me exhausted, wondering if I'd survive the next one.

I was fighting for victory—trying to earn it, prove it, secure it through my effort and willpower.

But I kept losing. Or at best, barely winning. And the exhaustion was crushing.

Then I encountered Colossians 2:15. "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

Wait. The enemy is already disarmed? Already defeated? Already on the run?

It didn't feel that way. It felt like he was winning. Gaining ground. Stealing my peace, my joy, my confidence.

But the truth wasn't about how it felt. It was about what Christ accomplished.

And slowly—so slowly—I began to shift. From fighting for victory to fighting from victory. From desperation to confidence. From fear to faith.

I started speaking truth to the lies. Not hoping the truth would work, but knowing it would.

"You say I'm not forgiven. But Scripture says I am—completely, fully, eternally."

"You say God is angry with me. But Scripture says His wrath was satisfied at the cross."

"You say I'll never be free. But Scripture says whom the Son sets free is free indeed."

And every time I stood on truth, the lies lost their power. The accusations fell flat. The enemy fled.

Not because I was strong. But because I was standing on ground he couldn't touch.

I'm still learning this. Still growing in it. There are days when the lies feel louder than the truth. Days when I forget that the victory is already won.

But more and more, I'm living from victory instead of for it. Resisting from rest instead of from fear. Standing in confidence because Christ has already triumphed.

The devil is on the run. And I'm learning to live in the freedom of that reality.

Song Integration

The attack came when I thought I was finally safe. I'd been out of the swamp, washed at the water's edge, learning the rhythms, sending roots deep. Then the accusations started—relentless, day and night. "You're not really changed. You'll always be that person. You'll never be free." I was exhausted, barely holding on, wondering if the enemy was right. I was fighting for my freedom, fighting to prove I was really

changed, fighting to hold onto ground I'd gained. And I was losing.

Then something happened. I was reading Colossians 2, barely able to focus, when verse 15 leaped off the page: *"Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."* Three words stopped me: **Disarmed. Public spectacle. Triumphed.** In that moment, I realized what I'd been doing wrong.

I'd been fighting **for** victory—like the outcome was in doubt, like I had to win through my strength, my determination, my spiritual disciplines. But that's not how it works. The victory is already won. The enemy is already defeated. Jesus didn't just wound him—He disarmed him, stripped him of his weapons, made a public spectacle of his defeat, triumphed over every power of darkness. **Past tense. Done. Finished.**

I don't fight **for** victory. I fight **from** victory. The devil isn't a threat I have to overcome. He's a defeated foe I resist from a position of victory. This shift changed everything. When you're fighting **for** victory, you fight from fear, from desperation, from weakness. But when you're fighting **from** victory, you fight from confidence, from rest, from strength—not your own, but Christ's.

This is a declaration, a proclamation, a battle cry. When you're in spiritual warfare, you don't whisper or hedge. You declare truth—loudly, boldly, with authority. The song does exactly this. It's aggressive, confrontational, declarative. Each line hits like a punch. Because that's what truth does to lies—it demolishes them.

The chorus declares: *"The devil is a liar, he's done. Ain't no grace where he's from. Devil's on the run—'cause I'm saved by grace."* Three truths: (1) The devil is a liar—everything he says is deception, every accusation false. (2) He's done—past tense, finished, defeated. Not "will be done someday." Done now. (3) Devil's on the run—he's the one fleeing, not me. Because I'm saved by grace. Notice: the reason for his defeat isn't my strength. It's grace. Always grace.

The bridge goes back to the source: *"Oh the blood! Oh the Lamb! Crushed the devil with a mighty hand."* The victory wasn't won in my bedroom during a spiritual battle. It was won at Calvary two thousand years ago when Jesus shed His blood and crushed the serpent's head. Everything I'm declaring in this song is grounded in that finished work—not in my effort or discipline, but in His blood, His sacrifice, His triumph.

Since writing this song, my approach to spiritual warfare has completely changed. I used to enter battles with anxiety. Now I enter with declarations: "Devil, you're already defeated. Christ disarmed you. You have no power here." I used to fight from fear. Now I fight from rest. Because the outcome isn't in doubt. I used to beg God for victory. Now I thank Him for victory already won and resist the enemy from that position of confidence.

You don't fight to become victorious. You fight because you already are. You don't resist the devil hoping he'll flee. You resist him knowing he must flee because he's already defeated. You don't beg for freedom. You stand in the freedom Christ already won. The devil is on the run. Not someday. Right now.

Lyrics: Devil's On The Run

[Verse 1]

Devil on the run

He's a wicked beast

Tried to take me down

But he lost his feast

He kicked me hard

Left me buried deep

But I rose in grace
While he lost his keep

[Verse 2]

In my darkest night
I forgot the gift I had
He pulled me low
Told me lies and made me mad
But even in the pit
Jesus called my name
Now I walk in light
I'm not the same

[Pre-Chorus]

Don't be fooled
By the snake in the weeds
He don't care
'Bout your hope or your needs
He can't give life
Only takes what you earn
He'll torch it all
Just to watch it burn

[Chorus]

Now I rise, now I run

By the power of the Son
But the Devil is a liar
He's Done!!
Ain't no grace where he's from
Tried to steal, tried to kill
But my soul he couldn't take
Devil's on the run
'Cause I'm saved by grace

[Verse 3]

Chains are gone
Yeah, the stone rolled back
He lost the war
On a bloodstained track
Truth is fire
And the lie won't stand
I'm a child of God
With a sword in my hand

[Chorus – repeat]

Now I rise, now I run
By the power of the Son
But the Devil is a liar

He's Done!!

Ain't no grace where he's from

Tried to steal, tried to kill

But my soul he couldn't take

Devil's on the run

'Cause I'm saved by grace

[Bridge – Breakdown / Call & Response]

Oh the blood!

Oh the Lamb!

Crushed the devil

With a mighty hand

Ain't no grave!

Gonna hold me down!

I've been bought

And I wear the crown

You can growl

You can scream

But you can't run

From the King

Devil's on the run—

He lost everything

[Final Chorus – Tag out strong]

Now I rise, now I run
By the power of the Son
But the Devil is a liar
He's Done!!
Ain't no grace where he's from
Tried to steal, tried to kill
But my soul he couldn't take
Devil's on the run
Yeah, the devil's on the run
Jesus won — and I'm saved by grace

Key Takeaways

- **Fight from victory, not for victory.** The battle was won at the cross. You're not fighting to defeat the enemy—you're enforcing Christ's already-accomplished victory by standing firm in truth.
- **The devil is already defeated.** Colossians 2:15 declares that Jesus disarmed the powers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them. Don't give a defeated enemy more credit than he deserves.
- **Lies lose power when exposed to truth.** The enemy's primary weapon is deception. When you identify the lie and speak God's truth over it, the stronghold crumbles. Light always dispels darkness.
- **Walk in the freedom Christ secured.** You're not in bondage anymore—you're free. Live like it. Resist the devil from a place of

rest, not fear, knowing he must flee when you stand firm.

Reflections for the Road

Questions for the Journey:

- Where are you still fighting for victory instead of from victory? What battles feel desperate? Where do you feel like you're barely holding on?
- What lies has the enemy been whispering to you? Write them down. Be specific. Now counter each lie with Scripture. Find the truth that exposes the lie.
- Read Colossians 2:15 slowly. What does it mean that Jesus "disarmed" the enemy? What weapons does the enemy no longer have?
- Are you giving the devil too much credit—or not enough? What would a balanced approach look like?

Practice: Truth Declarations

One of the most powerful practices for spiritual warfare is declaring truth over the enemy's lies. Here's how:

1. Identify the lie

What is the enemy whispering to you? What accusation feels most powerful? Write it down.

2. Find the countering truth

Search Scripture for the truth that directly counters the lie. For example:

- Lie: "You're not really forgiven." Truth: 1 John 1:9, Colossians 1:13-14
- Lie: "God is angry with you." Truth: Romans 5:1, Romans 8:1
- Lie: "You'll never be free." Truth: John 8:36, Galatians 5:1

3. Declare the truth out loud

Don't just think it. Speak it. "Enemy, you say I'm not forgiven. But God's Word says that if I confess my sins, He is faithful and just to forgive me. I am forgiven—completely, fully, eternally. Your lie has no power here."

4. Stand firm

The lie will come back. That's what the enemy does. But every time it returns, declare the truth again.

5. Thank God for the victory

End by thanking God for the victory that's already been won. For the truth that sets you free. For the armor He provides. For the fact that in Christ, the devil is on the run.

Closing Image

You're standing on the battlefield, but the battle is over. The smoke is clearing. The enemy is retreating. And you realize—you didn't win this fight. Christ did.

The victory was secured long before you arrived. The cross was the decisive blow. The resurrection was the final confirmation. The enemy was disarmed, defeated, sent running.

Your role wasn't to win. It was to stand. To hold the ground that Christ won. To resist an enemy who has no choice but to flee.

And as you look across the battlefield, you see the truth: the devil is on the run.

Not because you're powerful, but because Christ is victorious. Not because you fought hard, but because Jesus fought perfectly.

You can see him now—the enemy, scrambling, fleeing, powerless. All the lies exposed. All the accusations silenced. All the weapons stripped away.

He has nothing left. No authority. No claim. No ground to stand on.

And you? You're standing in Christ. Clothed in His righteousness. Protected by His armor. Empowered by His Spirit. Living in His victory.

The battle isn't to defeat the enemy. Christ did that at the cross.

The battle is to believe it. To stand in it. To live from it.

And when you do—when you really stand in the truth of Christ's victory—the devil has no choice but to run.

Because he's already beaten. Already disarmed. Already on the run.

And in Christ, you're on the winning side.

You whisper the truth that's become your anthem: "Jesus won. The devil lost. And I'm saved by grace."

And the enemy, hearing that truth, does the only thing he can do.

He runs.

Every single time.

Out of the Swamp: How I Found Truth (Chapter 14)

MOVEMENT 3: UNFORCED RHYTHMS OF LIFE (The Transformation)

Chapter 14: Living in the Moment

"God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' This is what you are to say... 'I AM has sent me to you.'" — Exodus 3:14

This Moment is Enough

Listen at: <http://go.skylertthomas.com/jlthAe>



Scan to listen: This Moment is Enough

An Invitation to Be Here

You've journeyed through thirteen chapters. From swamp to water's edge. From crisis to rhythm. From scattered to rooted. From waste to redemption. From defeat to victory.

But now I need to ask you one final question:

Where are you right now?

Not physically. Mentally. Emotionally. Spiritually.

Are you here? Or are you replaying yesterday's conversations you wish you'd handled differently? Rehearsing tomorrow's scenarios that might never happen? Catastrophizing outcomes that probably won't come to pass?

Be honest. Most of us live everywhere except the present moment.

We're stuck in the past, replaying and regretting. Or anxious about the future, planning and preparing and trying to control outcomes that aren't ours to control.

Never here. Never now. Always scattered across yesterday and tomorrow.

The cost of that is crushing. You're exhausted from carrying regrets that belong to yesterday and borrowing worries from tomorrow. Your today is weighed down by burdens it was never meant to carry.

But here's what I've discovered, and it's the truth that brings rest:

This moment is enough.

Not because it's perfect. Not because all your questions are answered or your problems are solved.

But because God's name is "I AM"—present tense—and His grace meets you here, now, in this breath, in this step, in this exact moment you're living.

This final chapter is about learning to be present. To live here, now, instead of scattered across time. To fix your eyes on what's Real instead of on what was or what might be.

To trust that this moment, with sufficient grace, is enough.

You don't need tomorrow's grace today. You can't access yesterday's moments anymore. All you have—all you've ever had—is this moment.

And when you stop running from it and start receiving it as the gift it is, you discover something remarkable:

It's enough.

So before you continue—this final time—pause. Actually pause. Be here. Consider:

Can you say, even if it feels strange: "God, I'm here. Right now. Not yesterday, not tomorrow. Here. This moment is enough. Your grace meets me here. Help me stay present. Help me be here with You."

That's the prayer that opens presence.

Because what comes next isn't about doing more. It's about being here—fully, completely, presently here—where grace has always been waiting.

Most of us live everywhere except the present moment.

We replay yesterday's conversations, regretting what we said or didn't say. We rehearse tomorrow's scenarios, anxious about what might happen or what we'll need. We carry the weight of past mistakes into today and borrow future worries to make today even heavier.

But we're rarely here. Fully present. Fully alive to this moment.

And we wonder why we're exhausted. Why anxiety feels constant. Why life feels like it's always somewhere else—either behind us in regret or ahead of us in fear.

Living in the present feels like:

- **Breath.** Deep, full, unforced. Not gasping for what's gone or hyperventilating about what's coming.
- **Attention.** Actually listening to the person in front of you instead of mentally rehearsing your response.
- **Gratitude.** Noticing what's here instead of obsessing over what's missing.
- **Rest.** Not from activity, but in activity. Working from presence instead of from anxiety.
- **Trust.** Believing that today's grace is sufficient for today. And tomorrow's will come tomorrow.

But here's what living in the present might also feel like, at least at first:

- **Discomfort.** Because the present requires you to feel what you've been avoiding.
- **Boredom.** Because you're so used to constant stimulation and distraction.
- **Vulnerability.** Because being here means acknowledging what's actually true right now.
- **Fear.** Because if you're not planning for tomorrow or fixing yesterday, what if everything falls apart?

This is normal. Because presence challenges everything our culture teaches us about productivity, control, and security.

Our culture says: Plan everything. Control outcomes. Never slow down.

Grace says: Be here now. Trust God with outcomes. Rest is not weakness.

Presence is a practice. A discipline. A choice you make moment by moment to come back here, to this breath, to this moment, to this sufficient grace.

Key Themes

1. God's Name is "I AM" – Present Tense

When Moses asked God for His name, God didn't say "I was" or "I will be." He said:

"I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you." — Exodus 3:14

Present tense. Always.

God isn't just the God of your past—though He was faithful there. He isn't just the God of your future—though He'll be faithful there too.

He is the God of your present. Here. Now. In this moment.

This changes everything. Because if God is present-tense, then His grace is present-tense too. Not stored up from yesterday. Not held back until tomorrow. Here. Now. Sufficient for this moment.

Paul writes: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Sufficient. Not abundant for tomorrow. Not excess for next week. Sufficient for today. For this moment. For this need.

That's all you need. And it's enough.

I spent years trying to secure tomorrow's grace today. Planning obsessively. Preparing for every contingency. Trying to control outcomes that weren't mine to control.

And I was exhausted. Anxious. Never present.

But when I learned to trust that God's grace is sufficient for this moment—and that tomorrow's grace will come tomorrow—I began to rest.

Not the rest of inactivity. The rest of presence. Being here. Trusting now.

2. Matthew 6:34 – Today's Troubles Are Sufficient

Jesus addresses our tendency to borrow tomorrow's worries:

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." — Matthew 6:34

This isn't fatalism. It's wisdom.

Jesus isn't saying troubles won't come. He's saying don't add tomorrow's troubles to today's load.

Today has enough to carry. Don't make it heavier by adding what hasn't happened yet.

I'm a worrier by nature. My mind races to worst-case scenarios. What if this happens? What if that fails? What if everything falls apart?

And Jesus says: Stop. Come back to today. Today has enough. You don't need to carry tomorrow too.

This is freedom. Real freedom. The freedom to engage fully with what's right in front of you instead of being paralyzed by what might come.

Living in the moment doesn't mean being oblivious to the future. It means trusting that God will give you what you need when you need it. That tomorrow's grace will come tomorrow. That today's grace is sufficient for today.

Corrie ten Boom, who lived through the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp, learned this truth:

"Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow. It empties today of its strength." — Corrie ten Boom, Clippings from My Notebook

If anyone had reason to worry about tomorrow, it was Corrie. But she discovered that borrowing tomorrow's troubles only robs today of the grace needed to live it well.

3. The Manna Experience: Daily Bread

When Israel wandered in the wilderness, God provided manna every morning. Daily bread. But the instruction was clear: gather only what you need for today. Don't try to hoard tomorrow's provision.

Those who tried to keep extra found it rotting by morning. The lesson: trust today's provision for today. Tomorrow will have its own.

This is living in the moment. Not grasping for more than you need. Not anxiously securing tomorrow. Just receiving today's grace and trusting tomorrow's will come.

"Give us this day our daily bread." — Matthew 6:11

Not weekly bread. Not monthly bread. Daily bread.

Because grace is meant to be received in rhythm—morning by morning, day by day, moment by moment.

4. Mary and Martha: The Better Choice

The story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) perfectly captures the tension between doing and being, between productivity and presence.

Martha is distracted by preparations—good things, necessary things. But she's missing the moment. Missing the presence of Jesus right there in her home.

Mary, on the other hand, sits at Jesus' feet. Present. Attentive. Fully engaged in the moment.

Jesus' words to Martha are gentle but clear:

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." — Luke 10:41-42

The better choice: presence over productivity. Being over doing. This moment with Jesus over the endless list of tasks.

This doesn't mean tasks don't matter. It means they're not the ultimate thing.

The ultimate thing is being present to God's presence. Being attentive to this moment. Being fully here.

I've been Martha most of my life. Busy. Productive. Distracted by preparations. Always doing.

And I've missed moments. Beautiful, sacred, unrepeatable moments because I was too busy to be present.

I'm learning—slowly—to choose Mary's part. To sit. To be. To let the tasks wait while I'm fully present to what matters most.

5. Practices of Presence

Living in the moment isn't automatic. It's a practice. A discipline. A set of habits that train you to be present.

Here are some practices that help:

Breath prayers. Simple prayers that sync with your breathing. "Lord Jesus Christ / have mercy on me" or "Be still / and know." They bring you back to this breath, this moment.

Daily examen. Reviewing your day with God at the end of each day. Noticing where you experienced His presence. Where you were grateful. Where you struggled. This trains your attention to see God in ordinary moments.

Sabbath rest. A weekly practice of stopping, resting, and simply being. Teaching yourself that your worth isn't tied to your productivity.

Mindful activities. Walking without a podcast in your ears. Eating without scrolling your phone. Having a conversation without planning your response. Fully engaging with what you're doing.

Gratitude practice. Pausing to notice what's here instead of what's missing. Giving thanks for this moment, this breath, this grace.

These aren't magic. They're training. Teaching yourself to notice God's presence in this moment. Anchoring yourself in the here and now.

6. Fixing Your Eyes on Jesus

Hebrews 12:1-2: "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

The race is now. The moment is here. Fix your eyes.

Not wandering eyes that constantly look around at what others have or what might go wrong.

Not backward eyes that live in regret.

Not anxious eyes that strain to see the distant future.

Fixed eyes. On Jesus. On this moment. On the grace that's present right now.

Fixing your eyes isn't passive. It's an active discipline. A choice you make moment by moment.

Choosing to see this moment—not as a means to an end, but as the place where God is present.

Choosing to focus on what you can control—your response, your attitude, your obedience—and release what you can't.

Choosing to look at Jesus instead of at the waves. At truth instead of at fear. At grace instead of at guilt.

Stories of Presence

Adam and Eve in the Garden (Genesis 1-3)

In the beginning, God created humans and placed them in a garden. Not a palace with protocol and hierarchy. Not a temple with rituals and rules. A garden—soil under their feet, fruit on the trees, animals to name, work to do with their hands. Simple. Present. Alive.

Picture the scene: evening comes, the heat of the day fading. A breeze moves through the trees. And they hear the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden. Not a distant voice from heaven. Not a vision or a dream. Walking. Present. With them.

This is what humanity was made for: present-moment communion with God. No anxiety about tomorrow. No regret about yesterday. Just now. This moment. This conversation. This walk together.

But the serpent's temptation was all about pulling them out of the present. "You will be like God, knowing good and evil." Not today. Tomorrow. Not what you have. What you could have. Not contentment in this moment. Grasping for something more.

Eve looked at the fruit—pleasing to the eye, desirable for gaining wisdom—and she reached beyond the present moment. Reached for tomorrow's wisdom today. Reached for knowledge God hadn't given yet. Reached beyond simple trust.

And everything broke. Not just in that moment. In every moment after.

The story of redemption is, in many ways, God bringing us back to the garden. Back to simple presence. Back to walking with Him in the cool of the day. Back to this-moment trust instead of tomorrow's anxiety.

The Exodus and Daily Manna (Exodus 16)

Every morning in the wilderness, the Israelites would wake to find the ground covered with something they'd never seen before. Thin flakes, white like coriander seed, appearing with the dew. They called it "manna"—literally, "What is it?"

The routine became sacred: rise early, before the sun gets too hot. Walk out of your tent with a container. Bend down. Gather. Enough for your family for today. Just today.

God's instruction was explicit: "Each one is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent." Not more. Not less. Just enough.

Some people didn't trust it. They gathered extra, hoarding manna for tomorrow just in case God didn't show up again. But the next morning, they'd open their containers to find worms crawling through yesterday's provision. It stank. Rotted. Useless.

The only exception was the day before Sabbath—then they could gather a double portion, and it would keep. Because God wanted them to rest, to trust that His provision covered even the day they didn't work.

The lesson repeated six days a week for forty years: trust today's provision for today. Tomorrow will have manna of its own. You don't need to secure it now. You don't need to hoard grace.

This is living in the moment. Not grasping for more than you need. Not anxiously securing tomorrow at the expense of today's trust. Just receiving today's grace with open hands, knowing tomorrow's grace

will be there when you need it.

Jesus' Temptation: Present Trust (Matthew 4)

Forty days into His wilderness fast, Jesus is physically depleted. Hunger gnaws at Him. The stones scattered across the barren ground actually look like bread. His body is screaming for food, and He has the power to fix it—one word and those stones become loaves.

The devil's first temptation is all about escaping the present moment's discomfort: "If you are the Son of God, turn these stones to bread."

In other words: Why suffer now when you could solve this immediately? Why trust the Father's provision when you have the power to provide for yourself?

Jesus' response anchors Him in the present: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." The Father's word for this moment is: fast. Trust. Wait. So that's what Jesus does.

The second temptation shifts tactics—this time the devil tries to get Jesus to force tomorrow's provision into today: "Throw yourself down from the temple and angels will save you."

Test God's future faithfulness now. Make Him prove He'll show up tomorrow by manufacturing a crisis today.

Jesus refuses: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Trust doesn't demand proof. Trust waits for God's timing, God's provision, God's way—not mine, not now, not on my terms.

The third temptation is the most blatant pull into the future: "Bow down and I'll give you all the kingdoms."

Everything Jesus came for—redemption, restoration, the kingdom of God—offered right now. Skip the cross. Bypass the suffering. Take the future today.

Jesus' answer is decisive: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."

This moment's call is worship and obedience. Not tomorrow's shortcut. This moment. This trust. This faithfulness.

Every temptation was an invitation to abandon present trust for immediate relief, manufactured proof, or future shortcuts. And every response was Jesus choosing to stay in the moment, trusting the Father's word for now.

This is the pattern: present trust defeats future anxiety. Moment-by-moment obedience overcomes the temptation to control what's next.

The Core Scripture Truth

Hebrews 12:1-2 - "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

This passage captures the theology of living in the moment.

The race isn't in the past—those miles are behind you. The race isn't in the future—those miles haven't arrived yet. The race is now. This step. This breath. This moment.

And the key to running it well? Fixing your eyes on Jesus.

Not on the finish line so far you can't see it. Not on the starting line you've already left. On Jesus. Who is present. Here. Now.

Pioneer and perfecter. Jesus has run this race. He knows the way. And He's with you—not just at the finish, but in this moment.

This is the theological foundation for living in the moment: God is not just the God of your past or your future. He is the God of your present.

The great "I AM"—not "I was" or "I will be," but "I AM." Present tense. Here. Now.

"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" — 2 Corinthians 12:9

Sufficient. Not abundant for tomorrow. Not stored up for next week. Sufficient for today. For this moment. For this need.

That's all you need. And it's enough.

The Wayfarer Moment

The shift from living in anxiety to living in the moment changed everything for me.

For years, I lived in two time zones: yesterday and tomorrow. I carried regrets from the past and anxieties about the future. The only time zone I wasn't living in was the present.

And I was exhausted. Haunted by what I'd done wrong. Terrified of what might go wrong. Never fully present to what was actually happening.

Then I encountered this simple phrase: "This moment is enough."

At first, I didn't believe it. How could this moment be enough? There's so much to fix, so much to plan, so much to worry about.

But slowly, I began to practice presence. Small things at first.

Noticing my breath. Really tasting my food. Looking people in the eye. Listening without already planning my response.

And I discovered something remarkable: when I was fully present, anxiety loosened its grip. When I focused on this moment, the weight of yesterday and tomorrow lifted—at least for a while.

I started asking myself: What does faithfulness look like right now? Not tomorrow. Not in the big picture. Right now.

And the answer was always simpler than I expected. Love this person. Do this task. Trust this truth. Take this next step.

I began practicing what Brother Lawrence called "the practice of the presence of God." Simple prayers throughout the day. Pausing to notice grace. Training my attention to return to this moment, this breath, this opportunity to be present.

I'm still learning. My mind still wanders to yesterday's failures and tomorrow's fears. But more and more, I'm able to return. To this moment. To this breath. To this sufficient grace.

Because this moment really is enough. Not because it's perfect. But because God is present in it.

His grace is here. His love is active. His strength is available.

And that's all I need.

Song Integration

I'd spent most of my life living anywhere but the present moment. My mind was either in the past—replaying conversations, regretting decisions, obsessing over what I should have said—or in the future—catastrophizing outcomes, trying to control variables I couldn't control. The present? I was rarely there. Because the present required me to feel, to be vulnerable, to acknowledge what was actually true right now.

Anxiety was my constant companion. The low-grade, ever-present anxiety of someone who can't trust God with the moment in front of him. I was always preparing, always planning, always trying to get ahead of the next crisis. And I was exhausted.

During a season of transition, when everything felt uncertain, a friend asked: "What do you need right now? Not tomorrow. Right now."

I couldn't answer. I'd spent so long living in yesterday and tomorrow that I'd forgotten how to be present to today.

"Maybe the question you need to ask isn't 'What's going to happen?' but 'Is God's grace enough for this moment?'"

I wanted to say yes. But honestly? I didn't know if I believed it.

That's when I began studying how God met people in their present moments throughout Scripture. Adam and Eve weren't given tomorrow's grace—they were given the garden that day. Abraham wasn't promised the full picture—he was called to trust God in that moment of promise. Joseph wasn't told the palace was coming—he was called to remain faithful in the prison.

The pattern was clear: God's people have always been called to live in the present tense. To trust that today's grace is sufficient for today.

"This Moment is Enough" emerged from this study. I wanted to trace redemption history through the lens of present-moment faithfulness—from the garden through the flood, Abraham's yes, Joseph's redemption, all the way to Jesus. And the refrain became my anthem: "We're not promised tomorrow, only the breath we breathe. Here in this moment, God's mercy never leaves."

This isn't resignation. It's liberation. I'm not promised tomorrow. I don't need tomorrow's grace today. I just need this breath, this moment, this sufficient grace right here. When you live from that truth—when you really believe this moment is enough—anxiety loses its grip. You're free to be fully present, fully here, fully alive to the grace that's already present.

Lyrics: This Moment is Enough

[Verse 1]

In the garden mercy covered the fall,
Two hearts broken, yet God heard the call.
The waters rose, but His promise remained,
A rainbow whispered through the pouring rain.
Love was alive in the moment back then.

[Chorus]

We're not promised tomorrow, only the breath we breathe.
Here in this moment, God's mercy never leaves.
From Genesis to Jesus, the story carries us—
This moment is the promise,
This moment is enough.

[Verse 2]

Abraham walked with nothing in hand,
Trusting the covenant, trusting God's plan.
Years went by, but His word held fast,
A future was born from a simple "yes."
Faith is alive in the moment we live.

[Chorus]

We're not promised tomorrow, only the breath we breathe.
Here in this moment, God's mercy never leaves.
From Genesis to Jesus, the story carries us—

This moment is the promise,

This moment is enough.

[Bridge]

These ancient stories are the ground beneath our feet,

The God of creation still makes our lives complete.

From the garden to the cross, from the grave to today,

The God who redeemed them is redeeming us the same.

[Verse 3 – Final Verse]

Joseph was broken, then lifted again,

From prison walls to the palace of men.

What others meant for harm, God turned to grace,

Forgiveness and mercy took sorrow's place.

Redemption is here in the moment we're in.

[Chorus – Final]

We're not promised tomorrow, but love is here today.

The God of all beginnings is guiding every step we take.

From Genesis to Jesus, His story carries on—

This moment is the promise,

This moment leads us home.

[Outro]

The story isn't over, the story lives in us.

This moment is a gift of grace—

This moment is enough.

This moment is a gift of grace—

This moment is enough.

Key Takeaways

- **God's name is "I AM"—present tense, not past or future.** He meets you in this moment, not in yesterday's regrets or tomorrow's anxieties. This moment is where His presence and grace are available.
- **Sufficient grace for today is enough.** Like manna in the wilderness, God's grace is given daily. Don't hoard yesterday's grace or borrow tomorrow's worry—receive what's here, now.
- **Presence over productivity.** Mary chose the better part—sitting at Jesus' feet—while Martha stressed over serving. Being with God matters more than doing for God.
- **Fix your eyes on Jesus, not the waves.** Hebrews 12:2 urges you to focus on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. When you look at circumstances, you sink. When you look at Him, you walk on water.

Reflections for the Road

Questions for the Journey:

1. **Where do you spend most of your mental energy—past, present, or future?**

Be honest. Are you replaying yesterday's conversations? Rehearsing tomorrow's scenarios? Catastrophizing outcomes that may never happen? Notice where your mind goes when it wanders. Write it down.

What is one specific thing you're carrying from yesterday or borrowing from tomorrow that's weighing down your today?

2. Read Exodus 3:14 and Matthew 6:34 slowly.

"I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14). God's name is present tense. And Jesus says, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:34).

If God is "I AM" (not "I was" or "I will be"), and tomorrow's grace will come tomorrow, what does that mean for this moment right now? Is this moment enough?

3. What does "fixing your eyes on Jesus" look like practically for you today?

Not wandering eyes that constantly look around at what might go wrong. Not backward eyes living in regret. Not anxious eyes straining to see the distant future. Fixed eyes. On Jesus. On this moment.

What does that actually look like in your life today? When you notice your mind wandering to past or future, what will you do to bring it back to this moment?

4. Read Luke 10:38-42 slowly—Mary and Martha.

Martha is distracted by preparations. Mary sits at Jesus' feet, present and attentive. Jesus says, "Mary has chosen what is better."

Where are you being Martha right now? Too busy, too distracted, too productive to be present? What would it look like to choose Mary's part—even for just one moment today?

5. How will you practice presence this week?

Not all the practices. Just one. Breath prayers throughout your day? Daily examen each evening? One tech-free meal where you're fully present? A walk without headphones where you notice what's here?

Which one practice will you actually do? When will you start? What will you say no to in order to say yes to this practice? Be specific. Make it small. Make it real.

Practice: The Daily Examen

One of the most powerful practices for cultivating present-moment awareness is the Daily Examen. Here's a simple version:

1. Become aware of God's presence

Take a few deep breaths. Acknowledge that God is present with you right now. Thank Him for this moment.

2. Review the day with gratitude

Walk through your day from start to finish. Notice where you saw God's presence. Where you experienced grace. What brought joy, peace, or connection.

3. Pay attention to your emotions

What moments stirred strong emotions—joy, anger, peace, anxiety? Don't judge them. Just notice them. These are often clues to where God is at work.

4. Choose one feature of the day

Pick one moment that stands out. Sit with it. What was God doing in that moment? What was He inviting you to?

5. Look toward tomorrow

Not with anxiety, but with hope. What's one thing you're facing tomorrow? How do you want to respond? What grace do you need?

Ask God for that grace. And trust that when tomorrow becomes today, the grace will be there.

Closing Image

You're standing at the edge of tomorrow, but you're not stepping into it yet. Not because you're afraid. But because you're learning the sacred art of being here. Now. In this moment.

The sun is setting on today. Tomorrow is still dark, still unknown. But this moment—this space between what was and what will be—is filled with light.

You can feel it. God's presence. Not in yesterday's memory. Not in tomorrow's promise. Here. Now. In this breath.

You remember the journey. The swamp. The water's edge. The unforced rhythms. The deep roots. The redemption story. The promise that nothing is wasted. The truth that the devil is on the run.

All of it leading here. To this moment.

And you understand: every moment of the journey was preparation for this. For learning to be present. To trust. To receive this moment—just as it is—as enough.

Tomorrow will come. It always does. And when it arrives, it will bring its own grace, its own challenges, its own moments.

But you don't need tomorrow's grace today. You just need this moment's grace. And it's here. Sufficient. Complete. Enough.

You whisper the prayer that's become your anthem: "This moment is a gift of grace. This moment is enough."

And you mean it. Because you've learned the secret: God is the great I AM. Not I was. Not I will be. I AM.

Present tense. Here. Now. In this moment.

You take a breath—deep, full, grateful. And you step forward. Not into tomorrow. Into this moment. The only moment that's actually yours.

And in this moment, you find everything you need: grace for this breath, strength for this step, love for this person, wisdom for this choice.

This moment is enough.

Not because it's perfect. But because God is in it.

And God is always enough.

The journey continues. There are miles ahead. But you're not walking them yet. You're walking this step. Living this breath. Trusting this moment.

And this moment—this sacred, grace-filled, God-inhabited moment—is enough.

More than enough.

It's everything.