

The book cover features a dark blue background with a central sunburst pattern of thin, light blue lines radiating from the center. Olive branches with leaves and olives are illustrated in a golden-yellow color, framing the top and bottom corners. The author's name is at the top, and the title is in the center. A solid golden-yellow band at the bottom contains the subtitle.

MICHELE CUSHATT

A FAITH  
THAT WILL  
NOT FAIL

A LENTEN EXPERIENCE

# INTRODUCTION

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For hundreds of years, Christians worldwide have prepared for Easter's joy by observing Lent. Although predominantly a Catholic and Orthodox practice, Christians of all denominations can and do observe Lent in an effort to prepare the heart, mind, and body for the celebration of Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday. Known as *Tessarakosti* in Greek, "the Forty", Lent is marked on the liturgical calendar beginning on Ash Wednesday and culminating the Saturday before Easter, which equates to a total of forty days, not including Sundays. The purpose of Lent, in short, is to focus on Prayer (our need for God's mercy and forgiveness), Fasting (personal sacrifice in order to remember Jesus' sacrifice), and Giving (responding to God's mercy and grace by offering the same to others). It is a season of reflection, confession, and service, all leading toward the glorious day when God, once and for all, made it possible for sinful humanity to have full access to Him, through the resurrection of Jesus. With this in mind, I carefully chose passages from my book, *A Faith That Will Not Fail*, to provide a complete Lenten Experience for you. If you find this experience helpful you might want to check out the full book, which includes many more meditations to guide you as you draw closer to the cross. For now, as you walk through the next six weeks of prayer, fasting, and giving, read one of the meditations per week, allowing the story, scripture, and reflection to enrich your Lenten Practice and point you closer to your Savior.

## THE PRACTICE OF LAMENT

### WEEK 1

# LAMENTING THE UNEXPECTED LIFE

*It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what's happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation not to be able to explain—and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell.*

—N. T. WRIGHT, “CHRISTIANITY OFFERS  
NO ANSWERS ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS”

On Thursday, December 30, 2021, as another difficult year marked by a global pandemic ended, a wicked storm moved through Colorado. Although the storm came with neither rain nor snow, it delivered wind gusts at upwards of 80, 90, and 100 miles per hour. Sitting in our country home forty-five minutes south of Denver, I listened with concern to the howling wind rattling my windows. The months of September, October, and November had been unusually warm and dry, as if summer refused to concede to winter. Even December came with sunshine and very little snow. By December 30, we'd had nominal

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moisture and precipitation. I couldn't remember another December like it, where sweaters sat untouched in the closet and T-shirts filled the laundry.

After more than two decades in Colorado, I knew that windy days like this one—especially during hot and dry seasons—could spark devastating wildfires. Scrub oak cover most of our eight acres, easy kindling for a wayward spark or strike of lightning. They'd already shed their leaves in preparation for a winter that hadn't yet come. That Thursday, I listened to the wind as it whistled through our eaves, and I prayed for protection.

It was only an hour or two later that my biggest fear became a reality. Not for us or our neighbors but for the communities of Superior and Louisville, both sitting an hour north of us outside the city of Boulder.

Video footage soon surfaced showing shoppers running to their parked cars at a local Costco and residents fleeing their homes as the wind whipped smoke, ash, and sparks in every direction. The scene showed terror and chaos, an ordinary afternoon in a sluggish holiday week turned to tragedy. Later, I read news accounts of firefighters struggling to save structures at the risk of their own lives, fighting an unrelenting wind that outpaced them at every turn. In spite of their tireless effort, they realized minimal results. Within a single day, 1,084 homes were destroyed by the Marshall Fire. It took months to complete the investigation. No matter, the damage was done, the losses devastating.

I've struggled to wrap my mind around the magnitude of the destruction. In a single day, 1,084 homes, representing 1,084 families, were gone. So many memories, family heirlooms, and photos burned up in the span of minutes. Christmas presents opened only five days before turned to ash. Plans for a hopeful 2022 up in smoke.

Over the next months, these individuals and families filed insurance claims. Some were determined to rebuild, while others couldn't bear to return and decided to start fresh elsewhere. Regardless, life would continue. It always does. These now homeless families would build new

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homes, buy new furniture and appliances, make new memories and celebrate holidays in houses smelling of fresh paint and possibility.

But rebuilding takes years. And before these families could build the future, they had to attend to the ash of the past. Charred remains needed to be waded through to look for surviving treasures. Collapsed homes, little more than cinders, needed to be bulldozed. Losses needed to be cataloged, then submitted and explained to insurance companies. That alone could take months or years. Then, new plans needed to be drawn up, new permits pulled, construction crews hired, foundations laid. Taking stock of losses is a long, painful process.

This story and the painful recounting of it is the best representation I can think of for the biblical practice of lament. In Hebrew, lament means to wail, denoting a demonstrative form of grief, not merely an inward feeling of sorrow. In the Bible, lament is a critical part of worship. And it is always honest and expressive.

I realize that beginning a book about faith with the practice of lament might feel a bit intimidating. Wouldn't it make more sense to start with worship or gratitude? They certainly sound more hopeful. And yet as I considered my experience and likely that of the Marshall Fire survivors, I realized an important truth: hope without lament is like trying to build a home without dealing with the rubble.

To build an enduring faith, you and I must deal with the debris, cataloging the losses. I've learned that the grieving is the necessary first step to new living. Like clearing out the ash, lament allows the Spirit to help the heart heal and rebuild.

Just as the cross is necessary to the resurrection, lament is often the path to authentic worship. This means that if you are the one grieving, it is okay to weep. Your losses are worthy of lament. This isn't the way it's supposed to be, and it's okay to give voice to your anger and anguish.

And if you aren't the one grieving today, give thanks. And then make space for those who are. Add your tears to theirs. In that way, we together worship the only one who can heal.

## ***Five-Minute Faith Builder***

*How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?  
How long will my enemy triumph over me?*

*Look on me and answer, LORD my God.  
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death.*

—PSALM 13:2–3

Pastor and author Dr. Glenn Packiam claims that true lament holds at least five purposes:

1. It is a form of praise.
2. It is proof of the relationship.
3. It is a pathway to intimacy with God.
4. It is a prayer for God to act.
5. It is a participation in the suffering of others.<sup>7</sup>

In my experience, lament is often a combination of most if not all of these, accompanied by the music of my individual grief. Consider these five purposes. Which do you need most right now? How might adding the practice of lament to your spiritual journey build up your faith? Record your thoughts in the margin or in a journal. Then pray this prayer:

*Father, lament feels foreign and sometimes overwhelming. And yet Jesus cried out to you without fear. Teach me how to bring my grief to you, just as Jesus did, so that I can experience your touch of intimacy, healing, and peace.*

## THE PRACTICE OF LAMENT

### WEEK 2

# THE PURPOSE OF LAMENT

*The reason we don't want to feel is that feeling exposes the tragedy of our world and the darkness of our hearts.*

*No wonder we don't want to feel. Feelings expose the illusion that life is safe, good, and predictable.*

—DR. DAN B. ALLENDER AND DR. TREMPER

LONGMAN III, *CRY OF THE SOUL*

Only two months after fighting for my life, I drove to a speaking engagement. The day before, I was too sick to get out of bed, concerned I might need to cancel. But by the next morning, I mustered my notoriously stubborn will, put on dress slacks, a blouse, and makeup, and drove to make an audio and video recording for an international radio program. Determined to press forward as if nothing had happened, I swallowed all the fear, pain, and loss and put on my best faith-filled smile, complete with gloss. This is what faithful Jesus-followers do, right? They keep pushing through, no matter the cost.

I still have a picture of that day in my phone. My clothes hung off my frame, black shadows circled my eyes, radiation burns still flared red on my neck. I looked like an ad for the walking dead. I still have no idea

## THE PURPOSE OF LAMENT

how—or why—I did such a thing. I wasn't being faithful. I was being foolish. Although my determination and stubbornness have served me well at times, in this case they were nothing but denial.

Although I fulfilled my speaking engagement, my grief would not be ignored. In the months that followed, the weight of cumulative loss soon bubbled to the surface and demanded a reckoning. For close to two years, I walked through a deep and dark abyss of lament. Some days it looked like weeping. Other days it looked like anger. Often, I feared I was going off the deep end. But soon I came to learn that my brain and body were doing what they were made to do: processing trauma and loss. I needed to stop trying to stiff-upper-lip my way through (which made it far worse) and instead allow myself to tell the truth about my pain.

I needed to practice lament.

To lament is “to express sorrow, mourning, or regret for often demonstratively . . . to regret strongly.”<sup>8</sup> To lament is to give expression to the sorrow in your soul. In a sense, it is to make a formal complaint, but to take that complaint to the only one who has the power and authority to do anything about it: God Himself.

For a long time, I avoided lament. Reading Paul's instructions in Philippians 4:4–6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18, I thought the Christian life meant perpetual positivity. It's true that we who believe in our one-day resurrection have good reason for joy. But the Bible also talks about the practice and worth of lament.

In Genesis 50:10, Joseph and his brothers practiced lament “loudly and bitterly” at the death of their father, Jacob.

Exodus tells us “the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. . . . So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them” (Ex. 2:23, 25).

In 2 Samuel, when David learns of the death of Saul and his son Jonathan, he pours out a lament (1:17–27).



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Psalm 102 is titled “A prayer of an afflicted person who has grown weak and pours out a lament before the LORD.” Many additional psalms are lamentations, not praise. (See Psalms 6, 10, 13, 22, 38, 42, 43, and 130, among others.)

The book of Jeremiah, “the weeping prophet,” is a book of complaints. It is also the longest book in the Bible, containing more words than any other book.<sup>9</sup>

And I can’t fail to mention the book of Lamentations, which is exactly what its name implies: a book of lament.

This is a small sample of lament throughout Scripture. And yet in our modern worship experience, the practice of lament is notably absent. I believe we’re missing an essential building block of our faith.

What is the purpose of lament? N. T. Wright, author and senior research fellow at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford, England, wrote an article for *Time* in which he claims that “the point of lament, woven thus into the fabric of the biblical tradition, is not just that it’s an outlet for our frustration, sorrow, loneliness and sheer inability to understand what is happening or why. The mystery of the biblical story is that God also laments. Some Christians like to think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles in his world. That’s not the picture we get in the Bible.”<sup>10</sup>

First, lament gives voice to both our grief and our guilt. Like any open wound, neglect and disregard put you at greater risk for infection and scarring, even death. When we don’t give it voice, grief festers, ultimately consuming us with misery. But when we acknowledge our sorrow in the presence of the Savior, healing begins.

And second, the practice of lament not only allows us to identify and name our grief but also directs us to the source of our hope. Our grief and guilt can find redemption only when we turn to the one who holds the power and authority to redeem. As author Michelle Reyes

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says, “Let your lament be your declaration of hope in God in the midst of hard things.”<sup>11</sup>

To complain to anyone else may bring temporary comfort, but they hold no power to heal. And often we end up deeper in despair. But to voice our complaints to God tells the truth about our circumstances and acknowledges who is able to deliver.

Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III, in their book *Cry of the Soul*, discuss at length the role emotions play in our growing knowledge of God. “A determination to resolve our emotional struggles inevitably subordinates God as a servant of our healing rather than a person to be praised. Rather than focusing on trying to change our emotions, we are wiser first to listen to them. They are a voice that can tell us how we are dealing with a fallen world, hurtful people, and a quizzical God who seldom seems to be or do what we expect of Him.”<sup>12</sup>

“I wait for the LORD,” the psalmist writes, “my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. . . . Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption” (Ps. 130:5, 7). When we pour our tears out before the Lord, we will discover full redemption. Not partial. Not temporary. Full.

“It is finished,” Jesus said as His body gave way to death (John 19:30). And with that, my lament, however deep, ultimately ends in redemption.

Yours does too.

### *Five-Minute Faith Builder*

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

—MATTHEW 5:4

Author Philip Yancey writes, “In grief, love and pain converge.”<sup>13</sup> What have you lost? Big or small, what are the people, plans, purposes that, somehow, have not turned out like you hoped? One exercise that helped me take a giant step toward healing was to give myself permission to name my losses. It sounds indulgent, even counterproductive. Simply, I sat on the patio in my back yard with a pen and an empty notebook and made a bulleted list of the things I mourned. And as I named my grief, God started to heal my heart. Will you consider doing the same? Take a few moments to start your list. The purpose isn’t rumination but release. Name your losses. Go ahead, friend. He already knows.

## THE PRACTICE OF HUMILITY

### WEEK 3

## SEEING THE REAL ME

*When we see that humility is something infinitely deeper than contrition, and accept it as our participation in the life of Jesus, we shall begin to learn that it is our true nobility.*

—ANDREW MURRAY, *HUMILITY*

**M**ore than fifteen years after World War II officially came to an end, Adolf Eichmann, a first lieutenant and the SS Nazi mastermind behind the death camps, was captured and put on trial in an Israeli court. The year was 1961, and the shock waves of that horrific war still rippled throughout the world. For many, peace required justice. Thus, many dedicated their lives to tracking and capturing Nazi criminals, including Nazi hunters like Simon Wiesenthal who survived imprisonment in multiple death camps in pursuit of the criminals' prosecution as well as their own peace.

During Eichmann's trial, prosecutors presented a wealth of evidence, including thousands of pages of Eichmann's own words, captured during pretrial interrogation. In addition, they presented the court with a firsthand witness, a man name Yehiel Dinur, a Jewish survivor of one of Eichmann's camps. Dinur's testimony proved a pivotal component of the prosecution's case and, eventually, Eichmann's conviction and death sentence.

## SEEING THE REAL ME

In February 1983, twenty-two years after the trial and Dinur's testimony, Mike Wallace interviewed Dinur for an episode of *60 Minutes*. During the interview, Wallace showed Dinur a video clip of the Eichmann trial, the moment when Dinur entered the courtroom to testify. When he entered and saw Eichmann sitting several yards away, he collapsed to the floor. After the clip ended, Wallace turned to Dinur and asked him the reason for his collapse. Was it fear? Or hatred?

Neither. Dinur surprised Wallace and viewers with his answer. It wasn't hate or fear that caused Yehiel Dinur's collapse in the courtroom. It was Eichmann's ordinariness.

"Eichmann is in all of us," he said, six words that shook all who heard them. Eichmann wasn't a monster or a fire-breathing dragon. There was nothing towering or terrifying about him. Instead, he was average, ordinary. Eichmann appeared no different from the man you meet on the sidewalk or the stranger you pass at the store. "I was afraid of myself," said Dinur. "I saw that I am capable to do this. I am . . . exactly like he." Dinur saw himself.<sup>22</sup>

I'm not sure I'd have the same response. Seldom do I allow myself to consider the evil I am capable of. It is much easier to see the darkness in others. Although my flaws are many, I feel the pain of others' infractions far more than my own. When someone I love fails me, I'm more likely to feel anger at the wrong than empathy for their struggle. And—dare I say it?—something dark within even wants to retaliate. Although they haven't committed mass atrocities, I feel compelled to demand vindication for every wrong. And I doubt the weight of my sin would drop me to the floor.

In the Old Testament book of Exodus sits the familiar story of Moses delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Chances are, even if you are new to Christianity, you're familiar with the story. At last count, somewhere in the neighborhood of seven movies have been made about the exodus story, proving that a narrative of unjust suffering and heroic rescue appeals to a diverse audience, regardless of religious affiliation or lack thereof.

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Although my early exposure to the exodus story was through simplistic Sunday school lessons, I've since learned the many ways the exodus foreshadows the gospel: a people enslaved by evil, a deliverer sent to rescue, and a promised land waiting for those who are set free. Moses' journey foreshadowed a better salvation, one that would come thousands of years later when Jesus—a name that in Hebrew means “to save”—died on a cross to set those who were enslaved to their flawed humanity free.

But before the exodus, the Israelites faced a final Egyptian plague: the plague of the firstborn (see Exodus 11). In spite of God's persistent warnings to “let my people go,” Pharaoh remained unmoved (Ex. 7:15–16). Concerned about His people's suffering and Pharaoh's hardness of heart, God sent an angel of death to wipe out every firstborn male, both people and livestock. A devastating blow against evil. But this is what I want you to notice: the plague was to wipe out every firstborn male, Egyptian and Israelite alike.

But God offered the Israelites an out. Each family was to slaughter a single, perfect male lamb. Then they were to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of their door frames. That night, the angel of death would deliver the final judgment but pass over and spare Israelite homes covered by the blood of the lamb.

Sound familiar? Thousands of years later, another Lamb's blood was offered for anyone who receives its cover. Even so, we mustn't forget: Egypt is in all of us. The Israelites were destined for death as well as their slave drivers. The only difference, their only salvation, was the blood of the lamb.

Theologian and Yale professor Miroslav Volf, a Croatian who has witnessed humanity's propensity to see evil everywhere but in oneself, concludes, “Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners. . . . When one knows [as the cross demonstrates] that the torturer will not eternally triumph over the victim, one is free to rediscover that person's humanity and imitate God's love for him. And when one

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knows [as the cross demonstrates] that God's love is greater than all sin, one is free to see oneself in the light of God's justice and so rediscover one's own sinfulness."<sup>23</sup>

Yes, Eichmann and Egypt are in all of us. The only salvation for humankind, including both you and me, is to be covered by the blood of the Lamb.

### *Five-Minute Faith Builder*

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

—MATTHEW 5:3

In a culture that spends so much time and money talking about self-esteem, the practice of humility is severely neglected. Desperate to feel good about ourselves, we'd rather stay blind to our sin. As a result, we remain slaves. If you're physically able, spend a few moments on your knees in prayer. First, look at yourself with as much clarity and honesty as you can muster. Don't try to make yourself feel better; don't attempt to downplay your sinfulness or need. Tell the truth and own it. Then after facing your flawed self, picture Jesus covering you with Himself. Pray this prayer:

*Jesus, I don't deserve Your deliverance, but I receive it. Thank You for saving me.*

No more slavery and shame, friend. Only freedom.

## THE PRACTICE OF FORGIVENESS

### WEEK 4

# THE PEACE OF FORGIVENESS

*The power of just mercy is that it belongs to the undeserving. It's when mercy is least expected that it's most potent—strong enough to break the cycle of victimization and victimhood, retribution and suffering.*

—BRYAN STEVENSON, *JUST MERCY*

I found the old photo several days ago while organizing a stack of neglected files. It's a picture of three-year-old me celebrating Easter. My mom kneels on the floor next to me, large curlers covering her head. My Easter basket sits nearby, and I'm holding a colorful pinwheel, my cheeks puffed out as I blow and make it spin. It's a picture of purity, childlike innocence full of possibility and promise.

As I studied the photo these many years later, I looked at the little girl with a heart of compassion. This is a new practice for me. Historically my habit has been a shame-filled one, as I tend to browbeat myself with all the coulda, shoulda, woulda's of years gone by. But this particular day, photo in hand, I felt compassion, a wave of motherly kindness for the little girl who would one day face so many losses.

Bless her. She was so small, innocent. She still believed in dreams come true, didn't yet understand that life can be so very hard.



## THE PRACTICE OF FORGIVENESS

Perhaps it is the result of my age and the knowledge that my life is likely more than half over, but I feel a bit melancholy as I consider this one life I've lived. If I could travel back in time, I would do so many things differently. I see too many mistakes and missteps, and the regret weighs heavily on me.

But I also see the wrongs done by people I trusted, the ones who snuffed out that little girl's innocence. Because of their own unhealed pain, they caused much of my own. When I look at the girl holding the pinwheel, I see a tangled and complex history that is impossible to fully unravel and understand. Who is responsible? Where did it all go wrong, and how did her heart end up such a tangled mess?

On a sleepless night long ago, Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before His crucifixion and death. Unlike my three-year-old self, He knew what was coming, the betrayals and denials and abandonment by everyone who earlier that same day claimed to love Him. He knew that before the night was done He would be alone. Of course, He didn't want it that way. He pleaded with Peter, James, and John to help him through: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me" (Matt. 26:38).

But Peter and the others didn't have the same problem with sleep that Jesus did. Three times, Jesus caught them with their eyes closed. Then a short time later, Jesus was arrested in that very spot, and "all the disciples deserted him and fled" (v. 56).

I've been thinking a lot about this dark night. I've been thinking about Jesus' sleeplessness and His loneliness, the agony and necessity of His suffering. Is there a deeper wound than to be betrayed by someone you love, especially when you need them the most? But I've also been thinking about what happened a handful of days later, on the other side of the crucifixion and resurrection, when Jesus ran into Peter, James, and John again: "On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be

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with you!’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you!’” (John 20:19–21).

Three days before, Jesus’ closest friends had slept while He wept, fled while He faced arrest, denied Him while Jerusalem denounced Him, and then hid while He hung on a cross. They wounded their Savior as much as did the Roman soldiers who swung the hammers that hit the nails. And yet three days later, Jesus went and found them. These cowardly, fair-weather, tuck-tail-and-run friends who royally failed Him.

Rather than punishment, He offered them peace.

“Peace be with you!” He said.

Twice.

While I can easily waste years nursing a wound, Jesus didn’t allow Himself even a couple of days. Instead, He initiated peace to those who had condemned Him as well as those who had crucified Him even while He still hung on a cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Then, three days later, He forgave His closest friends with a gift of peace.

With this tender image of Jesus in mind, I look at the little girl with her pinwheel. No, she had no idea of the losses that would mark her life. My body and soul carry the weight of those wounds. I feel them even as I desperately try to be free of them.

But I also see how, on the cross, Jesus began to heal my wounds through the agony of His own. To those of us stuck in stories we never asked for or wanted, Jesus enters in with a promise: *Peace be with you!* He says.

And so today, when I look at the picture of the three-year-old me, I honor the wounds but also forgive those who caused them. Because I know that when you and I choose to forgive as Jesus did, the locked doors of our sorrow are opened to the healing presence of the Savior.

*Peace be with you!* He offers. In spite of everything, I receive it.

### ***Five-Minute Faith Builder***

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.*

—ROMANS 5:1–2

Ephesians 4 says, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (vv. 30–32). Forgiveness is rarely a one-and-done exercise. Often during my middle of the night musings, I realize I need to say the words again: *God, I forgive them. I’m letting it go one more time. I trust you.* It doesn’t take the sting of it away, but it reorients my heart and reminds me of the wisdom and love of my Father. Even if you don’t trust the person who hurt you, can you trust your good Father? He’s asking you to forgive, for your good and His glory. Take a few minutes, eyes closed and heart open, to tell God about those who have hurt you. Give it all back to Him. Then pray my prayer for yourself. Your peace awaits.

## THE PRACTICE OF CONNECTION

### WEEK 5

# THE HOLINESS OF COMMUNION

*I realized that healing begins with our taking our pain out of its diabolic isolation and seeing that whatever we suffer, we suffer it in communion with all of humanity, and yes, all of creation. In so doing, we become participants in the great battle against the powers of darkness. Our little lives participate in something larger.*

—HENRI NOUWEN, *TURN MY MOURNING INTO DANCING*

She came up to me at the end of our women's conference. Soft spoken, petite, silver hair, likely in her early sixties. For the prior two days, I'd been speaking to several hundred women gathered from a multicounty area in the Midwest. After two hard years of canceled in-person gatherings, these women were more than ready to be face to face, in the same space. They were hungry for connection, even more than for the glorious donut wall and chocolate fountain in the lobby. Two years' worth of hard stories simmered under the surface, needing the comfort of community. I tried to make space for their stories. As well as for the chocolate fountain.

## THE HOLINESS OF COMMUNION

While I signed books and hugged new friends between sessions, this woman hovered on the fringe. It wasn't until the end of the last session that she finally dared to step forward, introduce herself, and share her story.

"Thank you for what you shared." She spoke softly, looking around, as if worried someone might overhear. I thanked her for her kind words, and then I waited.

"I appreciate your honesty, being able to say out loud how hard it's been for you, and how you wondered if God had left you." She paused. "Of course, I haven't gone through anything as hard as you have." I doubted this to be true. Clearly whatever had wounded her went deep. This preamble was nothing more than her attempt to muster the courage to say in the day what had been eating her alive at night.

"My son died. He was hit by a car," she said.

*Noooooo.* What a loss. My heart hurt.

She wasn't finished.

"I was the one driving."

Silence reigned the next couple of moments, both of us carrying the weight of those words—her reliving them, my honoring the cost of them. When she spoke again, she told me it had happened decades before, but she'd rarely spoken of it. For years, not only had she been grieving the loss of her son, she'd also been blaming herself for it.

And then, like the first brightening of dawn's eastern sky, she took a breath and went on.

"I think it's time I started sharing my story," she said, and then exhaled. "You shared your story, and it's helping so many people. Maybe I can do the same."

I will never be able to understand the "why" of some losses. Even if I spent every moment of the rest of my life trying to unravel the reasons and make sense of the senseless, I know the "whys" will remain out of reach. But this I do know: When you and I choose to enter into these

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sacred spaces, sharing our scars while honoring another's, something otherworldly happens. Something holy.

It's called communion. A table shared by the broken and bleeding. A table of death. But also a table of life.

“By becoming flesh and blood, God reached out a hand from the distance of heaven and touched humankind. Bridging the distance of holiness, he not only became someone we can touch but became the one reaching to touch us. . . . In a world that pulled away from pain, Jesus pushed in. He reached for it, experiencing pain so we would know we're not alone in ours.”<sup>60</sup>

The moment Jesus exited heaven and entered human skin as a squalling, flesh-and-blood baby, His incarnation made communion possible. God was now within reach, close enough to touch. But our communion with Him wouldn't be complete until the one who healed became the one who bled. This is what Jesus tried to help the disciples understand at the Last Supper table when He broke the bread and shared the cup. He was offering them eternal communion with God Himself. But at the cost of His life. Life for death, and death for life.

Now, two thousand years later, we celebrate communion with another bread and cup. It's an invitation to remember the unbreakable communion we now have at the cost of Jesus' life. But it's not just for remembering. It's also for living.

The communion table is a shared table, Jesus showed us that. But it was never meant to end with us. Just as we've been the broken sitting at Jesus' table, we can offer communion to the broken needing a seat at ours. But you needn't wait for Sunday. Communion can happen in your neighborhood or school, at your office or front door.

Yes, at a women's conference.

Shared brokenness and shared healing. Communion with Jesus and each other. No table required.

### ***Five-Minute Faith Builder***

*Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.*

—1 JOHN 4:20

One simple way to practice creating communion spaces with friends and strangers alike is to learn the art of asking open-ended questions to spark deeper connection. Here are a few of my go-to relationship builders:

- What is your dream?
- Tell me your story.
- What's the hardest part of your life right now?
- What's the best part of your life right now?

Remember, there is only one Healer. Your job isn't to fix or cure but simply to connect. Pay attention and listen. Notice the people right in front of you, acknowledge their existence, tell them they matter, show them you care. Who is one person you can experience communion with this week? Resist the temptation to find an easy choice, like your best friend or your spouse. Instead, consider who God might want you to create a table with. Often God strengthens my faith when I follow Him outside my comfortable circle. After all, that's what He did for me.

## THE PRACTICE OF WAITING

### WEEK 6

# LIVING IN THE IN-BETWEEN

*One of the greatest strains in life is the  
strain of waiting for God.*

—OSWALD CHAMBERS

Today is the Saturday in between.

Some call it Holy Saturday, others Silent Saturday. Yesterday was Good Friday. Tomorrow is Easter. But today I sit in the Saturday in between, that long stretch between death and resurrection, when heaven was silent and all the world could do was wait.

During the dark expanse after Jesus' death, unanswered questions hung in the air. The Savior was, indeed, silenced. To whom do we turn when the one who is supposed to have all the answers stops speaking?

I've spent the better part of this morning considering what it must've been like for the disciples and the other Jesus followers when the one they lived for ended up dead. For three years, they slowly became convinced of His messiahship. Throwing caution to the wind, they put all of their faith eggs in the Jesus basket. Family members called them crazy, friends questioned their sanity, others rejected them outright. Still, they chose to follow this man named Jesus.

It wasn't easy to wrap their minds around the many miracles and



## LIVING IN THE IN-BETWEEN

wonders they'd seen firsthand. It never is. Demons cast out, illnesses healed, the marginalized welcomed, the dead brought back to life. After three years, their scrapbook of Jesus stories bulged at the seams, the many evidences of His divinity spilling out. Human minds couldn't contain the explanations of heaven-wrought glory.

But then in their favorite garden long after the sun had set, one of their friends approached with a mob. He went up to their Jesus and gave Him a kiss. Having agreed on such a sign ahead of time, mob members took their cue and arrested Jesus while the gaping disciples looked on.

*Wait. What?!*

Some thought this was the beginning of the revolution that would restore all wrongs to right. Peter grabbed his sword.

Jesus told him to put it away.

Surely this was when He'd call down fire from heaven.

Jesus told them He could, but He would not.

Confused, afraid, they ran.

This is what we do when we don't understand. We run.

This is the Saturday in between. God didn't behave the way we thought He would. Like the disciples, we sit in this place of death, facing an outcome we never expected or wanted.

*This is not what I signed up for!* I imagine the disciples crying. *He was supposed to save us!* They wail.

True.

He wasn't at all what they expected. He still isn't.

He is more. But before the more, the wait.

The in-between.

The someday but not yet.

I've never been much good at waiting. When I want something, I want it sooner than later. That book I want to write or project I want to complete? I want it to be finished now and flawless the first time. My skills as a leader and coach? I expect them to be fully developed

## THE PRACTICE OF WAITING

and always effective, without struggle and growth and time. I want my children to be mature and faithful today, and my relationships to be what God designed them to be right now. I want to skip over the uncomfortable process and get to the satisfying results.

But I too easily forget: the struggle now is part of the glory later.

To be human is to wait. We wait to be strong enough to walk. To be old enough to stay up late. To be legally the age to drive a car. We wait for the first date to become a wedding date, a pregnancy to deliver a baby, an interview to become a job, an introduction to become a friend. We wait for appointments, web pages, test results, oven timers, coffee orders, bones to heal, and loved ones to come home. We wait for apologies and justice and forgiveness and romance. We wait, and we wait. And we don't wait very well.

So we fill the in-between with all measure of swords and substitutes, hoping the waiting will be eased by whatever weapon we use to distract.

It never works as well as we hope.

We began this series of ten practices with the practice of lament, and I find it fitting that the practice of waiting brings the ten to a close. "Lament is not our final prayer. It is a prayer in the meantime," pastor Glenn Packiam says.<sup>66</sup> It is what we utter, in both words and silence, when we sit in the Saturday in between. It's the sometimes wordless, often tearful prayer of waiting, sitting neck deep in our struggles while waiting and believing in a future redemption.

This is our prayer in the meantime, while we lament what is and wait for what will be. There is hope, even when all other hope is gone. And that hope is in a love that will not fail, a love big enough to write a story that will make all of our lesser stories pale in comparison, a story written for those who wait.

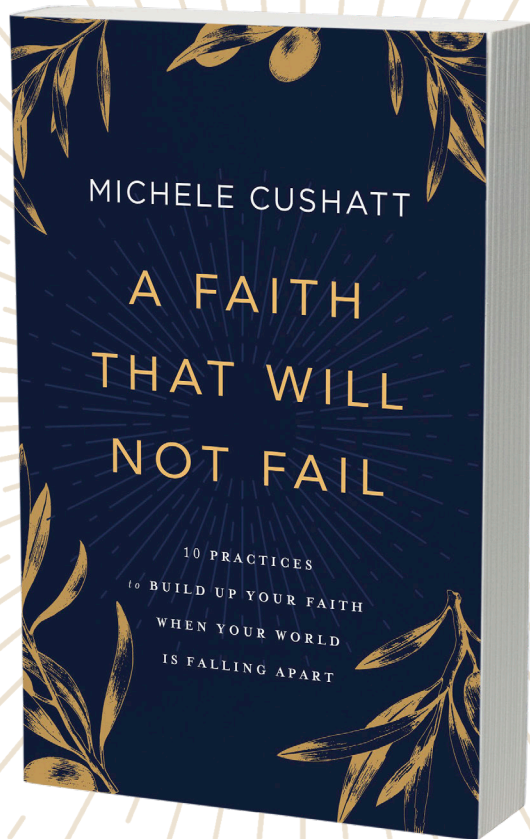
He is alive. He has come and He is coming. Will He find us waiting with eyes on the ground, caught up in today to the neglect of tomorrow? Or will He find us with eyes on the sky, joy on our faces at the return of our true love?

### *Five-Minute Faith Builder*

*But I trust in you, LORD;  
I say, "You are my God."  
My times are in your hands.*

—PSALM 31:14–15

What are you waiting for? An apology, a marriage proposal, a pregnancy test? Or maybe you're waiting for a child to come home, a healing to happen, or a job to open up? As Oswald Chambers soberly said, "One of the greatest strains in life is the strain of waiting for God."<sup>67</sup> Whew. Yes. Been there. Still there. In a sense, every page of this book is about being in a waiting place and learning how to strengthen your faith when you don't know how it will turn out. Let me ask you again: What are you waiting for? Every day we live in the Saturday in between while we wait to go to our true home. Can you trust that He's coming for you? And that when He does, all the lingering unknowns will be resolved once and for all? Write down what you're waiting for. Don't be afraid to give voice to the longings of your heart. Then pray the words of Psalm 31:14–15 aloud, placing them in your Father's hands while you wait.



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