

One Slice at a Time

**What a Friend Told Me
the Year My Marriage Ended**

Eric Elder

One Slice at a Time:
What a Friend Told Me the Year My Marriage Ended
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References to God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit have been
capitalized throughout, including within quoted Scripture, where the
translations cited render them in lowercase. This departure from the
source text is the author's, made as a matter of personal reverence.

Special thanks to Sharon Giacinto, whose name, stories, and wisdom fill
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Introduction: I Thought That Was the End of Me

When my marriage ended, the loss I could name was the marriage.

The fear underneath it was something else.

I thought I had lost my standing.

I've been in ministry for thirty years. I've written books about marriage. I have thousands of people who read what I write, and I had told a great many of them that God had brought me a wife. Five hundred people had been invited to a celebration.

And when it came apart, what I believed — not as a passing thought but as a settled fact, for months — was that I was finished. That nobody would listen to me again. That I had forfeited the right to say anything to anyone about anything. That I might not even be able to hear from God anymore, because why would He keep talking to a man who had gotten something that large that wrong.

I sat in a parking lot one night after walking out of a meeting and thought: *I can never come back here. I can never do ministry again.*

If any part of that is familiar to you, then this book was written for you and you can stop wondering whether it's for someone in worse shape.

What This Book Is Not

I'm not going to take you back through my marriage.

She isn't named in these pages, and I've kept the particulars out. That isn't the same as anonymity, and I won't pretend otherwise. Our marriage was public knowledge. What I can

leave out is the account itself. Who did what, in what order, and why.

There's a fair amount in this book about my own failures. I've left that in, because it's mine to give.

The rest of it isn't mine to give, and I don't think it would help you anyway. Two people can't be understood by a stranger reading one of their versions. And I've watched what happens to a man who spends his recovery trying to get the record straight — there's a chapter about that later.

This is also not a book about a seven-month marriage. It's a book about the year after — which turned out to be a much longer year than I expected, and is not entirely over as I write this two years later.

Who Sharon Is

About twenty conversations run underneath this book.

Sharon Giacinto is a friend and a counselor. She knew my first wife, Lana, before Lana died. She's in her eighties. She and her late husband, Chuck, spent decades in ministry, in real estate, teaching, counseling, praying with people, burying people. She has been through more than I have and says so rarely.

Early on she told me she would tell me what I needed to hear rather than what I wanted to hear, and then she did that every single time, including the weeks I may have preferred anything else.

We talked roughly every other week for about a year. I took notes the entire time, because that's what I do and because I could tell within the first few minutes that I was going to want them later.

Those notes are this book.

Most of what's good in here is hers. What's mine is the reporting — what Sharon said, what I did with it, and where I got it wrong at first.

What I'm Actually Offering You

Not a program, and not a timeline.

Twenty-eight things that got me back on my feet, in roughly the order I learned them. Each one begins with something that happened to me, moves to something she said, and ends by handing it to you to use or leave.

Some of them will land and some won't, and I've tried to write them so you can take one and set the rest down. That's the method as much as the content. A person in the first year of this cannot absorb everything at once, and one of the earliest things she taught me was to stop trying. There's a better way.

I'd add one thing about how to read it.

I have cried through the writing of most of these chapters, two years out. If you find yourself further into this than you expected to be, still not fine, still ambushed on ordinary Tuesdays — you are not behind. There's no schedule. I checked.

When I sat in the parking lot that night, I thought that was the end of me.

It wasn't.

And it doesn't have to be the end of you, either.

Chapter 1: Divorce Is Like a Death

“Record my misery; list my tears on Your scroll — are they not in Your record?” (Psalm 56:8).

There’s a bench in Lexington, Illinois, with Lana’s name on it. I put it there after she died. When I’m driving that way I stop, and I sit on it, and no one minds.

That’s what a death gets you. A bench. A service with people standing in the back. Casseroles in the freezer for a month. Cards that keep arriving after you’ve stopped expecting them. Fourteen years later, her name still comes up in conversation and people say it out loud without lowering their voices.

Eleven years after Lana died, I got married again, and less than a year later it was over, and I got none of that.

No service. No casseroles. No cards. A few people who didn’t know it had happened and asked how married life was treating me. A few more who knew and were quiet, the way people are when they’re not sure whether to say sorry or congratulations.

And five hundred people who had been invited to a celebration that never took place.

I felt maybe the loss didn’t count.

I had a whole case built. It was short. We never lived together — not more than a week or two at a time as we were traveling between states until we got things together. There were no children between us. Nothing to divide, nobody’s schooling to rearrange, no house to sell.

I’d sit there and think: *people go through “real” divorces. Twenty years, four kids, a mortgage. What do I have to grieve?*

And underneath that, quieter: with Lana, death came by cancer. With this one, I wondered if I did it myself.

I still don't know everything that went wrong. But somewhere in there, I was part of it.

So I went eight or nine months treating a wound as an embarrassment, wondering at times why I felt so tired.

What She Said

I told Sharon some of this, sideways, the way you tell somebody a thing you've decided isn't important.

She didn't argue with the facts. She just put it in a different category.

"A divorce is like a death," she said. "You've already been through such a great loss in your life. You still have the same trigger spots, and they're going to feel different than the ones you had with Lana."

Then: "But there is a grief to the death of something."

And then, the other part that I wrote down: "Don't put yourself down when you just need to break down. Go ahead."

The phrase she used was *trigger spots*. Same trigger spots as a death, she said, but they'd feel different than the ones I'd had with Lana.

She was right, and the difference is specific. Lana's trigger spots were mostly objects and dates — her handwriting on something, the anniversary, a song. They ambush you and then they pass.

The ones from a divorce are questions. Somebody says *how's married life* and the trigger isn't grief, it's arithmetic — how much do I tell this person, how long will this take,

are they going to want the whole thing right here in the parking lot?

Same Category

Sharon and Chuck used to own a real estate franchise, and the company flew them out to California for the franchise training. Chuck wanted Sharon to be in the room for all of it.

One of the first things the trainers covered was hiring. If somebody comes to interview who has just been through a death or a divorce, they said, understand that within that first year they're not going to be ready to carry a full load. Bring them on part-time. Watch how they handle pressure before you hand them everything.

The trainers put those two in the same category. A death and a divorce.

The first six months, they said, the person is going through the process. The second six months, they start making their decisions — they may pick up and move, they may change everything, you don't know yet.

They weren't saying don't hire them. They were saying don't expect peak performance inside the first year.

A national real estate company, teaching franchise owners how to staff an office, had a spot-on theology of grief.

I told Sharon I was definitely not at peak performance.

What That Number Did

That fact itself was truly encouraging — and it's just a fact. A year. Not a suggestion, not a goal, not a spiritual benchmark. A period of reduced capacity that hiring managers plan around.

What it did was change the question.

I had been asking *what is wrong with me* — why couldn't I concentrate, why would I lose an afternoon, why a task I'd done a thousand times now took two days. That question has no floor. You can fall down it forever.

This is the timeline changes the question, and it has an answer.

I'm not at peak performance. I'm four months in. Those two sentences sit together without contradiction.

A Floor, Not a Ceiling

Years ago I lost a job after eighteen months. It took me seven years to get over it.

Eighteen months of employment. Seven years of recovery.

I remember running that arithmetic on that one at the time and finding the answer unsurvivable. If a year and a half of work cost me seven years, what does a thirty-year marriage cost? Most people wouldn't live long enough to finish paying.

Grief isn't priced by duration. That's the mercy in it and it's also the warning, because it cuts the other way too — short doesn't mean small.

So take the year as a floor and not a ceiling.

I'm still working through it.

The year isn't a due date. It's the earliest anyone should be expecting much of you, not the day the books balance.

What a Death Gets That This Doesn't

Grief isn't the hard part. Grief is just heavy.

The hard part is grief with no permission structure around it.

When Lana died there was a script and everybody knew their lines. People knew to come. They knew to bring food, and to say her name, and that I'd be strange for a while, and that nothing I did at a funeral would be held against me.

The script feels different for this. There's no gathering. There's no casserole. There's no socially recognized moment where someone is allowed to be visibly wrecked in front of people who love them.

Sometimes what you get instead is opinions. And a certain kind of question — *how are you doing?* — that you can't help wondering about. Is this care, or is this fishing?

I can't say I got this from many people. But the question sat there anyway, and I found I was trying to answer it before I answered.

I went looking for the script. I asked Sharon at the beginning whether I ought to be going to a divorce recovery group, or if there was a book, or if someone had written down the basic guidelines — don't contact her family for two years, or whatever the rule was supposed to be.

Then I admitted the real problem, which was that I didn't even know what questions to ask.

That's what an absent ritual feels like from the inside. Not sadness. Disorientation. A man of sixty-one at the time with thirty years of ministry behind him, driving down the highway wondering whether if a pamphlet.

So the grief goes underground, where it does not get smaller. It just stops being witnessed.

Everything else in this book assumes you'll let yourself call this what it is. A death. A loss of something you highly valued.

The Porcupine

I sent my six kids a cartoon after things fell apart. A porcupine sitting in a bathtub of water, with no bubbles left in it. The porcupine was looking at the bottle of bubble bath on the floor beside the tub, saying, *“Well, that didn’t work out very well.”*

I told them this was how I felt right then.

Sharon’s counsel about the kids was practical. Tell them when it’s a rough day. Tell them when it’s a good one. If they don’t know, they’ll compare notes with each other — *I talked to Dad today, he said he was fine, but he didn’t sound fine* — and they’ll spend their energy trying to work out whether you’re all right instead of just knowing.

A grown child does not need to be protected from the fact that you’re sad. They need to be protected from having to guess.

The Song of the Bow

When Saul died, David tore his clothes and wept and fasted until evening.

Saul had spent years hunting him. Saul had thrown a spear at him in his own house, chased him into the wilderness with three thousand men, and hunted him from cave to cave. There was no funeral David was obligated to attend and no ritual anybody would have expected of him.

Nobody would have blamed him for feeling relief. He probably did feel relief. Relief and grief are not opposites, and they apparently have no trouble sharing a room.

What David did was write it down. He composed a lament — the Song of the Bow — and 2 Samuel says he ordered that the people of Judah be taught it.

He took a loss nobody had a ceremony for, and he made one.

That's the move. When there's no bench and no service and no casserole, you don't get to wait for somebody to hand you a ritual. You build the ritual.

What You Might Do

Give yourself the year. Write down the date it ended and count forward twelve months, and if you're not at peak performance in month five, look at the number instead of examining your character.

Tell the people closest to you where you actually are. Not the full account — a rough day is enough, and it saves them from guessing.

And make the ritual, since nobody's going to make one for you. Write the thing down. I typed out my own summary of that whole relationship — the good in it, the bad in it, all of it — not to publish and not to send to anybody. Writing it down let me look at it as an object instead of a wound, and then let me set it on a shelf for a bit.

You are not exempt from grief because your marriage was short, or because there were no children, or because a court finished it faster than a funeral would have.

There's a bench in Lexington with Lana's name on it, and I stop when I'm driving that way.

Nothing anywhere marks the other one.

So I'm making this.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You keep a record of tears that nobody else witnessed. Thank You that You don't require a loss to be respectable before You would call it a loss. Lord, for those of

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us who have been ruling ourselves out — because it was short, or because we're the ones who filed, or because we think we've already used up our allotment of grief — would You overrule that? Let us stop auditing our own pain to see whether it qualifies. Give us the honesty to tell the people who love us where we really are today. And where there's no ceremony and no casserole and nobody knows what to say to us, would You be the One who marks it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read 2 Samuel 1:17-27. David composed a lament for a man who had hunted him and had it taught to the whole nation. What does it tell you that he made a ceremony where none was required?*
- 2. Read Psalm 56:8. What does it mean that God keeps a record of tears (King James Version) — and what would change if you believed that about the crying you've done where nobody could see you?*
- 3. What's the case you've built for why your loss doesn't count? Write the argument out in full, then read it back and ask whether you'd say it to a friend in the same position.*
- 4. What date does your year start from? Count twelve months forward and write that date down. What would you do differently this month if you took that timeline seriously?*

Chapter 2: It's Never Just One Thing

"Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you" (1 Kings 19:7b).

I want to tell you about the morning I fell apart on the phone with a woman in a hospital billing office, over four hundred dollars, and won. But I didn't feel like I won.

Five years earlier, during the prep for my heart surgery, the scans had picked up a couple of aneurysms in my abdomen and some narrowing in my carotid arteries. Nobody had followed up on it. When I finally got in front of a new cardiologist, she looked at my chart and said she couldn't understand why nobody had checked on this in five years.

I did not want to do those scans.

I didn't want to spend the money — it was around ten thousand dollars, and the way my coverage works, if they *find* something wrong, it's covered, and if they *don't* find something wrong I'm on my own. I'd get a thirty-five percent discount for paying up front, which would have saved about a thousand dollars, so there was a decision inside the decision.

But mostly I just didn't want to know. I only vaguely knew what might go wrong, but as long as I didn't do the scan, I didn't have to hear the answer.

I finally scheduled them in a city an hour away, and I scheduled them there on purpose: that office had a doctor on site, so I could do the tests and get the results in the same trip. One drive. One half-day. Done.

I did the first test. I did the second test. Then I asked when I'd be seeing the doctor.

The doctor had called in sick. There was no doctor in the building.

They offered to reschedule me with the doctor for the following week closer to home. Another day off, another drive, and a four-hundred-dollar office visit for a ten-minute conversation about results I had already read online that morning. Unremarkable. Unchanged.

So I asked, as calmly as I could, whether they might waive the fee for that future visit, since I'd only come to this city so I could see the doctor on the same day as the tests.

She said they'd have to charge for that doctor's visit. It's the policy.

I said I understand, but if *I* had missed the appointment without twenty-four hours' notice, you'd charge me for that too, wouldn't you?

She said that's different.

I asked if the doctor could just email me the results. No — it has to be in person. Could we do it by phone? No — it's policy.

And I could feel it starting. That hot, tight feeling that starts somewhere under my ribs.

I explained it again. Then I explained it again. By the fifth time my voice was up and my hands were shaking and I finally said, loudly, that I would not be paying for that future visit and I would not be taking another half-day off for something that was not my fault.

There was a pause. Then she said, "Well, they called you, didn't they?"

I said no. Nobody called me. I found out after the tests were over, standing at the front desk.

"Oh," she said. "They didn't call you. Okay, that's different. Let me check on it."

And that was it. She fixed it. No second charge, just a second drive.

I hung up the phone and sat there shaking, and I did not feel like a man who had just won anything. I felt like the guy who yells at people over four hundred dollars.

The Part That Bothered Me

It wasn't the first time.

I'd done the same thing with a contractor. I'd done it with an administrator at a school where I'd been staging a production. I'd done it in this marriage more times than I want to count — explain, explain, explain, and then snap. And snapping *worked*, which was the worst part. People fixed things when I snapped. Nothing seemed to change when I was reasonable.

A few weeks earlier I had cried in a bathroom at Walmart, twenty minutes after walking out of a Celebrate Recovery meeting, a biblically based 12-step program.

So the question I brought to Sharon that week wasn't about the hospital. It was: what is wrong with me? Why does four hundred dollars take me from a one to a ten? I've negotiated contracts. I've run a ministry on donations for over three decades. I've been in rooms far harder than that office visit.

I laid the whole thing out for her, the whole ridiculous story, expecting her to help me manage my temper.

She said, "The problem is, it's never just one thing. It's a pile."

Doing the Math

I wrote that down, and then I sat with it, and then I did the math on that particular Wednesday.

I had a marriage ending. I had papers sitting unsigned and unsure if they would be. I had five hundred people I'd invited to a celebration who now had to be told something. I had a ministry I'd stopped doing and couldn't figure out how to start again. I had money going out and not much coming in. And I had two tests I'd been avoiding for five years, and the scans would tell me whether those words were about to become the rest of my life.

That was the load I was carrying into the conversation.

Four hundred dollars didn't do that to me. Four hundred dollars was just the piece that happened to be on top.

We all know the phrase about the straw that broke the camel's back. Nobody blames the straw. Everybody understands the problem is the load. But when it's our own back, we look at the straw and conclude something must be deeply wrong with us.

Sharon put it another way. She said it wasn't the doctor's office at all — it was the whole thing, all of it at once. And the same had been true at that school. That hadn't been one bad evening either. It had been a daily piling on, for months, and I'd read the final evening as evidence about my character.

That was the first genuinely new thought I'd had in weeks. I'd been running a trial in my head with myself as the defendant, and I'd gotten the charges wrong. I wasn't an unstable man who couldn't hold it together over a routine billing dispute. I was a man carrying six things who got handed a seventh.

Those are not the same diagnosis, and they don't have the same treatment.

What God Did About Elijah's Pile

There's a story about the prophet Elijah.

Elijah just had one of the greatest days of his career. He stood alone against four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, called down fire from heaven in front of the whole nation, and won. Total victory. Then he outran a chariot on foot all the way to Jezreel.

And then he gets a message from someone saying she intends to kill him.

He runs a full day into the desert, sits down under a bush, and asks God to take his life. One of the greatest prophets in Israel, twenty-four hours after one of the greatest miracles of his life, wants to die because of a threatening message.

It looks completely disproportionate. It is completely disproportionate — if you only count the message.

But look at what God does about it. He doesn't correct Elijah's theology. He doesn't remind him about the fire on the mountain. He doesn't tell him to pull himself together, and He doesn't ask him a single question about why he's overreacting.

He lets him sleep. Then an angel wakes him up and feeds him. Then He lets him sleep again. Then the angel comes back and feeds him a second time and says:

"Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you" (1 Kings 19:7b).

The journey. Not the message. God treated the pile.

The assignment comes later — there's a mountain, and a wind, and an earthquake, and a fire, and then that famous gentle whisper, and eventually new work to do. But none of that happens until after two meals and two long sleeps. God fed him before He talked to him.

I find that to be an enormous relief. There is a kind of collapse that isn't a spiritual failure and isn't a character flaw.

Sometimes it's just weight. And God's first response to weight is not a sermon.

What Changes When You Know

Two things changed for me once I could see the pile.

The first is that I stopped issuing verdicts on myself from single incidents. That sounds small. It isn't. Every one of those blowups had been going into a file in my head labeled *evidence that I am too weak for my own life*, and my wife had been telling me things that agreed with that file, and I was starting to believe the whole thing. Seeing the pile didn't excuse my high volume at that office visit. It just correctly assigned it.

The second is that it changed what I do next.

Sharon told me that once I could see the pile, the Holy Spirit would help me compartmentalize — that I'd start being able to take one thing off the top and handle it by itself, without setting off an avalanche. She said I'd begin to think: *I am going to deal with this, and nothing else.*

The way I do it now is simpler. Before a conversation I know might go sideways, I write down the one thing I want and the one sentence I'll say. In that office visit, the sentence was: *"The doctor wasn't there. I'm not able to pay for a visit that didn't happen."* It would have taken nine seconds.

The reason I couldn't find those words in the moment is that I wasn't arguing about the appointment. I was arguing about the whole pile, with a woman who had nothing to do with any of it.

The Other Person Has a Pile Too

Sharon told me she watches people's eyes. If someone won't look at her, she figures there's trouble at home, that they're

having a miserable day, and that she's probably their problem for the moment.

That woman in the office was somebody's employee, reading a policy off a screen, on some Tuesday of her own. I have no idea what was on her pile. I know I got added to it.

And the person at the school, the one I finally exploded at — when I thought about it honestly, months later, I could see that he'd had plenty stacked up already, and what I said just put him over. His reaction wasn't proportionate to my sentence either.

None of that means I was wrong about the four hundred dollars. I wasn't. It means the volume wasn't about the four hundred dollars, and neither was hers, and neither was his.

Almost nobody you deal with today is responding only to you. That is worth remembering when someone's reaction to you seems far too big for what you did. And it's worth remembering when your own reaction is, too.

If you find yourself shaking over something small — and then adding *that* to the list of things wrong with you — try doing the math first. Write down everything you're actually carrying this week. Not the incident. The load.

What I found was that I wasn't falling apart over four hundred dollars. I was carrying six things and somebody handed me a seventh. And once I could see that, I was doing considerably better than I'd thought.

Which raises the real question, and it's the one I asked Sharon next: what am I supposed to do with a pile that big?

She said something about pie.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You know exactly what we're carrying, down to the last item, even when we've lost count ourselves.

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Thank You that when Elijah collapsed, You didn't lecture him — You fed him and let him sleep, and You called the journey what it was. Lord, would You do that for us? Show us the whole load instead of just the last thing on top of it. Where we've been handing down harsh verdicts on ourselves from one bad afternoon, correct us. Where we've been quick to judge somebody else's reaction, give us the grace to remember they're carrying something we can't see. And give us the wisdom to take one thing at a time from Your hand. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read 1 Kings 18:36-46 and then 1 Kings 19:1-9. What had Elijah just accomplished, and how much time passed before he wanted to die?*
- 2. Look at how God responds in verses 5-8. What does He do first, and what does He not say? What does that tell you about how God views exhaustion?*
- 3. Think of a recent time your reaction seemed bigger than the situation deserved. Instead of asking what's wrong with you, try listing everything you were carrying that week. What was actually on the pile?*
- 4. Is there someone whose reaction to you felt out of proportion? What might have been on their pile that you couldn't see?*

Chapter 3: One Slice at a Time

“The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day” (Exodus 16:4b).

A few days after my wife left, I sat down at my desk and made a list of everything that had to happen.

I had to tell the five hundred people who had been invited to a celebration that it was no longer going to take place. I had to cancel the events. I had to get papers drawn up and figure out how to get them signed by someone in another state who I had no idea if she’d sign them. I had to decide what to say to thousands of email subscribers who had read all about how God had brought us together. I had to figure out what to do about the health insurance we’d combined. I had to answer my six kids.

And underneath all of that, I had a desk with six separate piles of projects I’d set down when I met her and hadn’t picked up since. A movie script. A puppet opera video I’d stopped editing at Christmas. Brochures I’d had printed to raise a hundred thousand dollars, sitting in a box, unfolded.

I looked at that list and had one thought. It was not a godly one.

I want to be done.

Not done with the marriage — that decision had already been made. Done with the *aftermath*. I wanted a date on the calendar when all of it would be finished and I could go back to being a person with a normal Tuesday.

So I started trying to do all of it at once. I’d draft the note to the five hundred people, get three sentences in, remember the insurance, go look at the insurance, get overwhelmed, open the movie script instead, and accomplish exactly nothing in four hours. Then I’d go to bed feeling like a man who’d wasted a day he couldn’t afford to waste.

When I described this to Sharon, she said, “You’re trying to do it all at once, and you can’t.”

Then she told me not to make a single announcement until Monday. That was on a Wednesday. She just handed four days back to me on my calendar.

I felt about a hundred pounds lighter.

The Pie

A few weeks later she gave me the picture that went with it.

She said she uses the old pie thing with people. Don’t try to eat the whole pie at once. Cut it up, take a slice, and deal with that. If you eat the whole thing, it’s going to make you sick. She said she’s watched people take a quarter of a pie in one sitting and then wonder why their stomach hurts.

I wrote it down even though I thought it sounded like something on a magnet.

I’ve been going to Celebrate Recovery long enough to have heard *one day at a time* several hundred times. I believe it. I’ve said it to other people. But by that point in my life I’d stopped hearing it, the way you stop hearing a clock in your own kitchen.

Then she told me the rest of it, and the rest of it is what made it true.

What Her Granddaughter Told Her

Sharon has a granddaughter who thinks math is fun. Sharon does not. She says she and math parted ways a long time ago.

But she’d been explaining the pie idea to this granddaughter one day, and asked her how something so simple could possibly help a person get organized. So the granddaughter

sat down and did the actual mathematics of it, dividing up a pie eight ways.

And then she said the thing that changed it for Sharon.

Grandma — every time you slice into that pie, some of the other slices run into it. The filling moves. The juice from the pieces on either side runs into the cut. So even when you take one slice, you have to recognize it's been sitting against the whole thing, and it's bringing some of the rest with it.

And it's still not more than you can handle.

That's the part that isn't on a magnet.

I *had* been trying to take things one at a time. That's what people were telling me to do. But every time I sat down to handle one thing, the whole thing came with it.

I'd sit down to write the note to those five hundred people, and within four sentences I'd be thinking about what she was posting online, and then about whether I'd been a fool from the first week, and then about the money, and then about whether God had ever actually spoken to me at all. One task. Six other flavors bleeding into it.

And I read that as failure. I thought it meant I couldn't do it right, that other people could compartmentalize and I couldn't, that something in me was broken.

The correction is that the juice running in is *normal*. It's what happens when you cut into a pie. It doesn't mean the piece was too big. It means the pieces were touching, which they always are.

I had been trying to take a slice with nothing else on it. There's no such slice.

God Deliberately Built a System You Can't Stockpile

When the Israelites came out of Egypt into the desert with no food, God fed them with manna, and He was very particular about how.

"The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day" (Exodus 16:4b).

Enough for that day. Not for the week. And when some of them tried to store extra overnight, it bred worms and began to stink.

That detail matters when you're sitting in your own kitchen with a list you can't finish. God was not being stingy. He had every ability to drop a year's supply in the desert. He chose a system that could not be stockpiled.

There's only one thing a system like that produces: a person who has to come back tomorrow.

And there's a second detail in the story. On the sixth day they gathered twice as much, and it kept — no worms, no smell — because the seventh day was a Sabbath. So the rule wasn't rigid. God adjusted the portion to the day. Some days the slice is bigger. Some days the assignment is to stop.

Jesus said a similar thing near the end of the Sermon on the Mount:

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:34).

Each day has *enough*. Not too much. Enough.

What One Slice Actually Looked Like

For me it came down to three habits, and none of them are complicated.

I decided what the slice was before the day started. Not a list. One thing. Some days it was “write the note.” Some days it was “call the insurance company.” Some days it was “fold brochures,” which sounds like nothing, but it was a thing that got finished, and a thing that got finished was like medicine.

I let the juice run in without treating it as evidence. When the other flavors showed up — and they did show up — I stopped concluding that I was doing it wrong.

I put a timer on how much I’d talk about it. Sharon told me to decide in advance how long I’d discuss the divorce with any one friend, and then move on to something else. I actually set my phone. Twelve minutes.

That last one sounds juvenile. I said so at the time. She said it wasn’t, and she was right, because there’s a way to choke on your own subject.

She has a new Labrador who will take anything out of her hand and swallow it whole, and then she has to reach down his throat and pull it back out, because he has no idea how to eat a little bit of something. I did that to myself for months. I’d sit down with a friend who’d asked how I was doing and take the whole thing in one bite, three hours of it, and stand up afterwards wrung out and not always better.

The subject isn’t the problem. The portion is.

Different Than One Day at a Time

I told Sharon that I knew about *one day at a time*, but *one slice at a time* gave me something new.

One day at a time is about the clock, and the clock is not actually my problem. I can get through a day. What I couldn’t do was get through *everything* in a day, and no amount of “one day at a time” told me how much to put on the plate.

One Slice at a Time

A slice is about size. It's the amount, not the hour. Some days I got through three slices and felt like a man again. Some days one slice was the whole day's work, and one slice was enough, because there is no rule that says a Tuesday has to hold more than one true thing.

And there's one more thing I like about the pie analogy. Pie is not a punishment. I don't eat pie grimly. When I take a slice of something good, I can actually taste it. When I take the whole pan, I hardly taste any of it and I feel awful afterwards.

I had been trying to swallow the entire thing whole and not tasting one bite of it.

The pile in chapter two was real. I was carrying six things when the seventh came. But the answer to a pile that size was never going to be to lift the whole pile.

It was to cut it.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that we don't need more than one day at a time, even in the desert, even when we begged You for the whole year's worth. Thank You that You built us to need You again tomorrow. Lord, we confess that we want to be done — done with the grief, done with the aftermath, done with the part where everything is hard. Would You show us the one slice that belongs to today? Give us the grace to leave the rest on the counter without calling ourselves failures for it. And when the other flavors run into the piece we're working on, remind us that this is how pie works, and that it's still not more than we can handle with Your help. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. Read Exodus 16:1-30. Why do you think God chose to provide food that couldn't be stored up? What was He producing in the people besides full stomachs?

2. In verses 22-26, the rule changes for the sixth day. What does that suggest about how God adjusts what He gives us?

3. Read Matthew 6:25-34. Jesus says each day has enough trouble of its own. What are you currently carrying that belongs to a day that hasn't arrived yet?

4. If you could only finish one thing tomorrow, what would it be? Try writing it down tonight, before the day starts and decides for you.

Chapter 4: Learning to Go to Neutral

“May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day” (1 Samuel 25:33).

On that Monday night I walked out of a meeting — it was Celebrate Recovery meeting — drove to Walmart, and cried in the bathroom.

I’d been keeping a list that week at one of the exercises. Every time I could remember getting to that red place in my emotions — the place where my voice goes up and my hands start shaking — I wrote it down. I had a couple dozen of them by then, going back to high school, and they all had the same shape.

Somebody does something wrong. Not debatable wrong. Wrong the way a stop sign is red.

I let it go. I let it go again. I let it go a third time, because I’m a reasonable man and reasonable men don’t make a scene over one thing.

Then I finally say something, and by the time I say it I’m at a nine, and everybody in the room turns and looks at *me*.

That’s the part that’s hard to get through. Nobody argues about the original wrong. It just quietly leaves the room. What’s left on the table is my volume.

So that Monday night, someone said something to me that pushed me to the edge.

When it was my time to share, I said out loud that *this* was the exact thing I was dealing with in my own life that week. That I get angry when people do the wrong thing, and then I explode, and then they explode back, and somehow it becomes my problem — and it *is* my problem at that point, because I can’t find another way to say it that it doesn’t come back on me.

I had just handed the room something soft. And someone said something back to me that landed hard.

I couldn't take it. I wasn't out of control — I was standing at the edge of it and looking over, which is its own particular feeling.

So I said I couldn't hear anything right now, that I'd just shared something vulnerable, and that I was going to have to step out and go sit in my car. I said I was sorry, and that I didn't want to make anybody mad.

Then I walked out.

And in the parking lot, the whole thing landed on me at once. *I can never come back here. I can never do ministry again.*

I drove to Walmart. I don't remember deciding to. I stood in the bathroom and cried, and then I texted two of the group leaders, who had both been sitting there watching, and apologized.

Two Verdicts, Twenty Minutes

Both of them texted back within a few minutes, and they said more or less the same thing.

No need to apologize. Proud of you for standing up for yourself. We love you. We are for you.

I read it twice.

They were proud of me?

I was standing in a Walmart bathroom, convinced I was finished.

Same room. Same twenty minutes. Two completely different verdicts.

I told Sharon about all of it that week, including the part where I couldn't square what I saw with what they saw.

What She Said

She didn't start with the meeting. She started with a thing I hadn't thought to mention, which is that a few years before, I'd handled something hard well.

She said, "You can be at an emotional high — whether it's a good high or an angry high. And in both of them, you slack. You need to return to neutral."

The Third Option

Slack is what a rope does when the hand opens and lets go completely. Not lowered. Dropped. And that's why I'd crash.

I'd been living with an on-off switch, not a dial.

Setting number one on my dial was hold it in. Swallow it, be gracious, be the bigger man, and add it to the pile. Setting two was splatter. Neither of them had a floor.

What I hadn't realized on my own was that from a high — any high — the next move doesn't have to be a crash. It can be neutral.

Neutral isn't swallowing it. Swallowing it is what got me to the nine in the first place. Neutral is coming down off the throttle without going through the guardrail.

And it turns out I'd done it before, in the good direction. Sharon had watched me on what she called an authoritative high, in a situation where I could have said *I don't need another problem, deal with it yourself*. I didn't. I stepped in and handled it.

I'd never counted that as a skill. I'd only counted the failures. Twenty-four entries on my list, all of them losses, and not one entry for a night I came down clean.

That's not a record. That's a prosecution file.

Two Things

Sharon gave me two things, and they're in order.

Find the triggers. Not the general observation about my temper — the specific list of what puts me at the edge. I already had the list. I'd made it that week without knowing I would use it here.

Then know ahead of time what you're going to do about it. Before you're in the room. Because in the room, there's no deciding — in the room there's only doing whatever you already do.

Her son gave her the sentence she uses for the second part: *Is this the mountain I want to die on?*

Some of them are. A few things are worth the whole nine.

What's actually happening on an angry high, she said, is fear. That's why I don't want anyone near me, why everything in me is saying *don't touch me, don't come near me*. That's not anger protecting itself. That's fear.

And when I'm fearful, she said, others becomes fearful — because they don't know what I'm going to do.

I thought my anger was the problem and my fear was private. They were the same weather. Everybody in that Monday night meeting could see it, but I couldn't name it.

Then she told me about a couple she was working with, both of whom could explode. Her instruction to them was that one of them has to put their arms out. Just open your arms.

They asked her how you're supposed to hug that.

She said, "You do. It's a decision."

David Had a List Too

There's a story in 1 Samuel that's one of the best accounts of an angry high in Scripture.

David and his men had been protecting a wealthy man's flocks in the wilderness — a real service, unpaid, unasked for. At shearing time David sends ten men to ask, politely, for whatever Nabal can spare.

Nabal insults him and sends them back empty.

David was in the right. That's what makes the story useful. He wasn't imagining the slight, he wasn't being sensitive, he hadn't misread the situation. He had done a good thing and been treated with contempt for it.

Put on your swords, he tells them. Four hundred men, up the hill, to kill every male in the household over a refused request for food.

Nobody in that story would have called it disproportionate in the moment. He'd have gotten there and done it and had reasons the whole way.

Abigail intercepts him on the road. She brings food, she takes the blame that isn't hers, she talks. And David stops.

"Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me" (1 Samuel 25:32).

He thanked her for stopping him. Not later, after he'd cooled off and thought better of it — right there on the road, still armed, he understood exactly what he'd been about to do and what it would have cost him for the rest of his life.

David went to neutral. He didn't swallow it; the account is plain that he was furious and that his anger had a case behind it. He came down off it, on the road, because somebody stepped in front of him.

That's what my group leaders' texts were. Someone on a road with a donkey full of bread, telling a man with a sword that this is not the mountain.

The Car in the Middle of the Night

Months later I bought a car on a Saturday, and it wore me out. I've bought a lot of cars. I still never know if I'm getting the right one.

I went to bed and woke up in the middle of the night certain I'd made a bad decision.

And I said to myself, *Eric, put it in neutral.*

The new car had a stick shift, which made it funnier at two in the morning.

I went back to sleep. I drove the car the next day and it was exactly right.

Neutral isn't only for anger. It works on a second guess, and second guesses are the things that come for me at two in the morning far more often than rage does.

I'm not going to tell you my second guesses are always wrong. Sometimes they're right. There are things I second-guessed about that marriage two weeks in, and I was right.

The point isn't that the doubt is false. The point is that two in the morning is not a place where most decisions get made well.

Not a Nine

I told a friend about that Monday night some time afterward. She grew up with a father who was abusive — physically, verbally, all of it — and she has been in rooms I've never been in.

I described what happens to me. The shaking. Backing up. Getting myself out the door before anything comes out of my mouth that I can't take back.

She said, "I hear what you're saying, Eric. But believe me, that's not a nine."

She'd seen a nine.

I'm not putting that here to defend myself. Though I might want to.

What she corrected was the number, not the work. My scale was calibrated to my own life, the way everybody's is, and on my scale a church meeting room on a Monday was the top of it. On hers, the top of the scale has broken furniture in it.

Both of those things are true at once, and the second one doesn't cancel the first. Whatever number it was, people in that room could see something happening and couldn't tell what I was going to do next. That's the part that needed fixing, and it needed fixing at a four just the same.

Two Things You Can Do This Week

Make the list. Not a list of your character flaws — a list of the specific situations that have put you at the edge, with what happened just before each one. Mine turned out to be one repeated situation wearing twenty-four different outfits.

Then pick the one most likely to happen again, and write down the sentence you'll say. Short. Something like *I need to step out for a few minutes, or I'm not going to talk about this tonight.*

Decide the exit before you need it, because you won't be deciding anything once you're in it.

I told Sharon, half jokingly, that if I could get to neutral maybe I wouldn't end up crying in a bathroom at Walmart.

Then I said: although maybe you still cry.

You still cry sometimes. Neutral isn't a personality transplant and it isn't holy indifference. I still get to a nine — my nine. I get there less, and I get down off it faster, and I no longer write a verdict on my whole life from the parking lot.

The man I was that Monday night thought he'd proven something about himself. The other leaders, who were in the room, thought I'd done the right thing.

They were closer.

The car has a stick shift. I have to reach down and shift it.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You're not surprised by our tempers, and that You don't mistake our worst twenty minutes for the whole of who we are. Lord, You know the places we get to — the ones where we can feel our own control getting thin. Show us the triggers before we're standing in them. Give us the words ahead of time, and the humility to write them down like a man who knows he'll need them. Where fear has been driving and we've been calling it conviction, tell us the truth about it. And thank You for the people You send out onto the road to stand in front of us. Help us to bless them for it instead of driving around them. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read 1 Samuel 25:2-35. What had David actually done for Nabal, and what was he planning to do about the insult? Was he wrong about the facts?*
- 2. Look at David's words to Abigail in verses 32-33. What does he thank her for, and how quickly does he say it? What does that suggest about how fast a person can come down off an angry high when somebody steps in?*
- 3. Think of the last three times your reaction went further than you meant it to. What happened in the ten minutes before each one? Is it the same thing three times?*
- 4. Pick the situation most likely to come around again this month. What's the one short sentence you'll say, and where will you go afterward? Write both down now, while nothing is happening.*

Chapter 5: It Doesn't Get a Vote

"And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44).

I pass out at needles. I have my whole life, and so have several people in my family, so I've learned to say it out loud to whoever is holding the needle.

I get stage fright too, and it goes to my hands. I can talk in front of anybody. I've done it for decades. But put an instrument in my hands and I'm done — I walked off a stage in the middle of a recital as a kid.

So when they told me the CAT scan needed contrast, which meant an IV, I knew what I was in for.

I told the nurse. I said I get faint, and that if I go down it's usually during the few minutes afterward. She said the best thing is to let me lie there a while before I try to get up. I asked her to talk to me during the process. She asked if I wanted her to narrate what she was doing, and I said yes, please.

So she talked me through the whole thing. Now the saline. Now the contrast, you're going to feel warm. And I did — I felt it move up into my throat.

While we were talking I asked her whether the needle thing and the stage fright could be related, because after I speak in public I crash for twenty-four hours. Not tired. I just drop. She said she hadn't heard that before but it made sense to her, same metabolic response.

Then the process was over and I came out of the machine, and she said I'd done really well.

I told her it had been a hard one for me.

And she said, “I’ll be honest with you. That’s the closest I’ve ever seen somebody come to a full-blown panic attack without actually having one.”

I knew it was bad, but I didn’t know it was that bad! I’d been doing that my whole life.

What I Thought My Body Was Telling Me

For as long as I can remember, I read the shaking as a verdict.

Not a symptom. A verdict. Evidence that underneath the sermons and the books and the decades there was a man who came apart, and the shaking was the truth of me getting out beyond the parts I could control.

It happened in my recent marriage too, in conversations I couldn’t get out of. I’d end up backed up across the room with my hands shaking. What frightened me most wasn’t the argument. It was that I didn’t know what was happening to me, or what to do about it.

The question I kept asking was *what is wrong with me*.

Then I started finding out how many people in my family do the same thing. Past and present, more than one branch of it. That didn’t make it stop. It did tell me I hadn’t invented it.

Then I started hearing it from people outside my family — people I respect, people who function at a high level and have carried this quietly the whole time I’ve known them.

So I stopped asking what was wrong with me and started asking how to get through it. That’s a different question, and I may not like the answer. I may not ever get over this. I’ve made a rough peace with that.

People have handed me their methods over the years. Tell the nurse. Drink something. Lie down before, not after.

Don't watch. I've tried most of them, with results all over the map.

I brought all of it to Sharon — the recital, the needles, the crash after speaking, the IV.

What She Said

As a certified nurse and a degree-holding counselor, she said every nerve in your body collects at the base of your neck. When you're going into something that requires your emotions to be controlled — a stage, a hard conversation, a table with an IV pole next to it — you tighten up there without meaning to. That runs down into your arms.

And then you go to do something and think, *why is my hand shaking?*

"That is a physiological reaction to fear," she said. "Those are real physical reactions to an emotional situation, because your body does respond. That's a whole lot more normal than you think."

She said something else, from the medical side of it. Under sustained stress, the neurotransmitters in your brain are close to shorting out. They don't know which way to go. And when you finally get to the place where you can say *all right, I'm ready to start over* — they start acting normally again. You think better. You feel better. You're able to plan.

The Pill I Didn't Take

I asked her about taking medicine. I told her I had a pill my doctor had prescribed in case I ever felt I needed it. She said there was nothing wrong with taking medicine.

I'd only ever taken a few days' worth of it in the entire time, because somewhere along the line I had decided I wasn't going to need it.

She said it was ok to carry one with me. That wasn't a spiritual failure. That was a practical reality.

A few weeks later I got through two hard days and told her I'd thought about taking one and hadn't needed to.

She said, "And if you had, it's not the end of the world."

The freedom was the whole thing. Having the option is what gave me the control. Not the medication — the fact that there was a door, and I could see it, and it was mine to open.

I had thought it was better for me not to carry a pill so I could prove I didn't need one, which is a strange way to prove you're not controlled by something.

The Sentence

Sharon said something to me weeks later, in a conversation about something else entirely.

"Our body is neutral. It follows along with our emotions and reacts to our emotions. But our bodily reactions — they're neutral in themselves."

All of these reactions make up the physical machinery — hands, heart rate, the back of your neck.

The medical world calls it sensory reprogramming, she said. Self-sensory reprogramming.

"We just think, oh, we're out of control. No. Your spirit is in control, because your flesh is neutral."

I hadn't separated the two.

I had them fused. Body and self, welded together, so that a shaking hand was a report on my character and a crash after a sermon meant something about my calling.

They come apart. The body follows. It doesn't lead, and it doesn't get to vote about what kind of man is standing there.

Hands shake because the nerves in your body gather at the base of your neck. That's it. That's the entire content of the message.

The Weekend

Some months later I hosted several men at my house for a retreat weekend. I usually get keyed up prior to an event like this and crash after.

But this time I went into it even-keeled.

Saturday night I started to come apart a little, because of what people were sharing and because part of me was sure I was the one who was supposed to be fixing it. I felt the other men wanted me to step in and deal with it decisively. *You're the one to say it, Eric.*

I sat on my hands. I said thank you for sharing, and next, and thank you for sharing, and next.

And because nobody jumped in on the man who seemed to need fixing, he later was able to share about a fear that was controlling him that was driving his behavior. That would have never surface had I tried to over manage the room.

I came out the other side of that weekend, still after three days time, and still without incident. Somehow I was able to shift into neutral.

I told Sharon about it, and she said, *"Welcome to graduation day. You're never going to do this again."*

Then she added, "Your actions and reactions are going to be different now. It's kind of like a reset."

She said she could see the difference in my face.

What she handed me across all those conversations was hope, and I don't want to shrink that word by using it casually. Not a technique. Hope that it didn't have to keep being this way. That a man could take a new direction even this late.

She talked about her own stress, and about people she'd watched carry things like this for years and go on ministering anyway. Through it. Not after it, once they'd been repaired. Nobody in her account ever got taken off the field for it.

And a long run of bad experiences doesn't get argued with. It gets outnumbered. Success breeds success, and the way through is to start putting small wins on the other side of the ledger where there's felt nothing but losses.

Which is why the picture that helps me most is still the one from the car. I know now that I *can* put it in neutral — not just because I understand the mechanism, but because I've done it and I can remember doing it.

The Sweat in the Garden

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Luke tells us that Jesus was in anguish, that He prayed more earnestly, and that His sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground.

Luke was a physician. He put the physical detail in his description on purpose.

And heaven's response to a body under that much load was not correction. *"An angel from heaven appeared to Him and strengthened Him"* (Luke 22:43). Strength, sent to a body.

People don't treat that sweat in the garden as a failure of faith. It's one of the most extreme physiological stress responses in the Bible and it belongs to the Son of God, in the middle of the most obedient hour in human history.

Paul told the Corinthians something similar about himself: *"I came to you in weakness with great fear, and with much trembling"* (1 Corinthians 2:3).

That's the man who wrote most of the letters in the New Testament, describing, perhaps, what was happening with his hands.

What You Might Try

Name it out loud to whoever is in the room with you. I told the nurse I pass out at needles and asked her to talk to me, and she did, and I got through it. It helped me through it, even though I was on the edge of what she described as the closest she's seen someone come to a full-blown panic attack without actually having one. :)

Carry the thing you may not need. Maybe it's a tablet, a phone number, a sentence you've already decided you'll say, an exit you've already located. The option is doing most of the work, whether or not you ever use it.

And when your hands go, try treating it as information about your nervous system rather than information about your character. The nerves in your body gather at the base of your neck. They gather there for everybody.

My hands still shake.

They don't get a vote about who I am.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You made these bodies and You are not disappointed by them. Thank You that when Your own Son sweat blood in a garden, You sent an angel to strengthen Him and never once told Him to pull Himself together. Lord, for those of us who have been reading our own symptoms as a verdict — the shaking, the racing heart, the crash that comes after — would You separate what our bodies are doing

One Slice at a Time

from who You say we are? Give us the plain sense to name it out loud to the people in the room. Give us the humility to carry help we may not use. And thank You that our bodies follow and do not lead, and that Your Spirit is the one in charge in here. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Luke 22:39-46. What physical details does Luke include, and what does the angel do about them? What does the passage not say about the sweat?*
- 2. Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. Paul names fear and trembling in the middle of describing his ministry in Corinth. Why do you think he told them, and what does he say his message rested on instead?*
- 3. What does your own body do under stress — hands, stomach, sleep, voice? When did you start reading that as evidence about the kind of person you are?*
- 4. What's one piece of help you've refused to carry because you were determined not to need it? What would it cost you to have it in your pocket unused?*

Chapter 6: You Are Not a Failure

"I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me" (1 Corinthians 4:3-4).

Years before any of this, I was refinancing my house to get one of my sons to college.

He'd been accepted at a school overseas. It wasn't the kind of place a normal student loan covers, so I went to the bank where I'd done my banking for several years and started the process with a banker who was, at the beginning, wonderful.

Then something soured. I still don't know what. Whatever it was, it went down and down over the better part of a year, and I kept telling him the same thing: give me every number in advance. I don't want to sit down in your office at the closing and find something new.

A few days before the closing, he called. They'd miscalculated the initial payment. I'd need to come up with several thousand dollars more.

We had been working on this loan for nearly a year, and he was telling me days out that the numbers had been wrong the whole time. I asked whether it could be rolled in with the rest of the payments, because I could not produce that kind of money on that kind of notice.

So he was on notice too. If there was anything else, this was the moment to say it.

Then I sat down in his office at the closing, across the table from him, and found another fee he had never mentioned. A small administrative fee.

I asked him to remove it, as I had asked for every number up front, repeatedly, and he knew it, even in the conversation that happened just a few days before. He said it was standard, and that they'd actually discounted it for me.

Discounted it. Which meant he had known about it all along, and rather than offend me again, they had marked it down to make it easier for me to swallow.

So I asked: is this a standard fee that's been on every loan you've ever written, and you still didn't disclose it to me until we sat down to sign? He said yes. I asked if their bank would cover it, as it was not part of our agreement. He said no. I was boiling. I asked him: Will you cover that fee yourself? Because you gave me your word to me that you had already disclosed everything that would be on the paper.

He said, "No, I won't." He said we could cancel the loan.

I said, "No, we'll do it. I just wanted to know."

I signed, my son got on an international flight, and I drove home shaking so hard I could barely hold the wheel — because that man could have killed the loan on the spot, and everything I had worked for regarding that loan and getting my son on the plane could have collapsed.

Three months later I moved the loan to a different bank so that one wouldn't get my interest.

But because of my shaking, I filed that day under *failure*.

The List

I keep a list in my mind. It's about a dozen entries long. Days I fell apart.

The banker is on it. There's a musical on it. There are others I'm not going to put in a book. They go back decades, and the common thread is that in each of them I ended up shak-

ing, or my voice went, or I said the thing badly, and I came home certain I had just proven something about myself.

I told Sharon about the banker.

She said, “That’s not a failure. These are times you have to step up to the plate. And you did.”

She added: “Think about how many people, in that same frustration, just say *fine, let’s get it over with, I don’t want to deal with this anymore*. They don’t stand up for themselves at all. You have to advocate.”

I mentally glanced over my list, and a fair number of entries had that same characteristic. I hadn’t failed. I had stood up.

The banker one isn’t a story about a man falling apart. It’s a story about a man who got a straight answer out of somebody, protected his son’s plans, signed anyway, and then quietly took his business elsewhere. What I’d been remembering was the shaking. What actually happened was that I did the whole thing right and my hands were unpleasant about it.

I had catalogued the physical sensation and thrown away the conduct.

The Newest Entry

The divorce went straight onto that list. Top of the pile, and by a wide margin the heaviest.

I said it to Sharon at one point, in the middle of talking about something else entirely: *I see it as failure and one of my worst moments*.

She had been telling me the decision was mine to make and that nobody else was going to make it for me, and that what mattered was whether I was making it out of fear or out of frustration.

Then: "It is both. And you know what? You have to tell yourself it's okay. How could you not feel fearful and frustrated?"

And then the verdict.

"You're not a failure. This is not a failure situation. Failure will be all on one side. It doesn't work that way."

I said okay, still thinking it through.

"If there's failure, it's on both parts. And it's not failure."

The Musical

Earlier I mentioned a musical was on my list. I had written a musical, directed it, and performed in it, along with a hundred other people from our town.

One of the last nights of rehearsal, everything went at once.

The person who had rented us the building handed me a bill four times what we'd agreed on. One of our key volunteers had to quit the show that same night, because she'd been told she had to follow certain procedures in the building and she was medically unable to do it.

Then the building's event manager locked out one of our child actors.

She hadn't come through the door by the arrival time they had announced to us a few hours earlier. We got the note out to everyone involved, but her mother hadn't seen it. When her mother dropped her off at the building as she had every other rehearsal, she drove away. So the child was standing outside in the snow, unable to get in and unable to go home.

I was in the main auditorium running the rehearsal when somebody came and got me.

I asked the building manager why he wouldn't let her in. It was cold and snowing outside. He said it was policy.

I asked what the policy was there for. He said to protect children.

I said if you wanted to protect children, you would let this child into the building.

He was furious. He stormed off and quit the show — as he was both in charge of the building that night and a cast member.

I had the child brought inside. I met with her mother, who by then had been called and was livid. Then I went back to the auditorium and finished directing the rehearsal, shaking, the way I do when I'm up against something irrational.

That night went on my list. Near the top of it, for years.

When I finally told Sharon about it, she already knew. She'd been there — as she was directing our dancers.

She said, "Oh, Eric. That was one of your best moments."

Then she told me something I had not known for all those years.

She was the one who sent someone to bring me backstage that night. The manager had been treating her dancers badly, too. She had called me in specifically, on purpose, because she believed I was the only person there who could properly deal with him.

She said she was proud of me.

I burst into tears.

I had spent years carrying that night as evidence of what I turn into under pressure. She had been carrying it as the night she picked the right man for the job, and watched him do it.

Returning the Gift

There's a harder piece to this, and it's the one I still work at.

From the very beginning I'd said I believed God had given my wife to me as a gift. I'd said it publicly. I meant it.

Sharon didn't ask me to retract that. She did something else with it.

She told me to go to God and say: *thank You for giving her to me, and thank You for the time we had.* And then: "Just like anything, sometimes we have to return a gift."

I made a joke, because that's what I do when something lands hard. I asked whether I could exchange it for a different model. Whether Adam had tried this with Eve.

She let me have the joke and then went right on.

"You can still do this with a thankful, grateful heart. It doesn't mean you're not thankful. It doesn't mean you're not grateful. It doesn't mean you didn't love her."

I told her that was hard for me to reconcile.

"You need to reconcile that," she said. "Because God is not judging you as being ungrateful. He knows Eric better than you know Eric."

I had one friend who couldn't reconcile it at all. This person told me straight out that they could not put together *she was a gift from God and you're getting a divorce.*

What I said back was the truest thing I had at the time: I don't know that I can reconcile it either. I believe both are true.

Sharon's answer to that was two sentences long. It isn't their place to reconcile it. And not everybody is going to agree.

Paul Wouldn't Judge Himself Either

Paul is being picked apart by the Corinthians.

He says he cares very little what they think of him, or what any human court thinks. Ordinary enough — plenty of people have said that, usually while thinking rather a lot of themselves.

Then he says: *I do not even judge myself.*

And then the line that says it all. *My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.*

He's saying his own verdict doesn't count. In either direction. Feeling clear doesn't establish innocence, and — the part that matters for anyone holding a list in their mind — feeling guilty doesn't establish guilt.

I had been running my own courtroom. Prosecutor, judge, and the only witness called.

Paul recused himself. He wasn't claiming to be fine. He was saying he wasn't qualified to rule.

What You Might Do

Write your own list. The days you fell apart, as many as you can remember, in whatever order they come.

Then go back through them one at a time and separate two things that have gotten welded together: what your body did, and what you actually did. The shaking, the voice, the tears in the car — that's one column. The conduct is the other. Like me, maybe you've been grading yourself on the wrong column.

And if there's someone in your life who can't reconcile two things about your situation, you can stop trying to do it for them. You may not be able to reconcile it yourself yet. Both things can be true while you wait.

There are about a dozen entries on my list. I'd gotten several wrong.

I'm not sure I'm qualified enough to have written it.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You are the judge and we are not — not of other people, and not of ourselves. Thank You that You know us better than we know ourselves, and that You don't mistake a hard day for a verdict. Lord, for those of us keeping a private list of everything we think we've failed at, would You go through it with us? Show us what actually happened on those days. Where we stood up and did the right thing badly, let us see the standing up and not only the badly. And where we're carrying a thing we can't reconcile — grateful for a gift and unable to keep it — hold both of them for us until we can. Thank You that You are not judging us as ungrateful. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5. Paul refuses to judge himself and says a clear conscience doesn't prove innocence. What does that suggest about the reliability of your own verdict on yourself, in either direction?*
- 2. Sharon said failure requires all the cause to be on one side. Where in your situation have you assigned yourself the whole account? What would an honest division actually look like?*
- 3. Make the list. Then take the oldest entry and write down separately what your body did and what you actually did. Which column have you been remembering?*
- 4. Is there something you're grateful for and also had to let go of? What would it take to say thank You for it out loud without taking it back?*

Chapter 7: Humbling Is Not Humiliation

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time” (1 Peter 5:6).

I was asked to give my testimony one night at Celebrate Recovery. It was a special night, as it was the seven-year anniversary of that church’s program.

Many families and neighboring communities had been invited. And I was going to share that night how God had been working in my life, including getting married recently.

Before I gave my testimony that night, I was praying and journaling. I wrote down what I believed God was saying to me.

I’ve journaled much of my life. It’s how I hear better. I write down what comes, and then I sit with it for a few days and ask some people I trust, because I don’t take my own handwriting as scripture and I don’t always trust myself.

I asked God what might happen that night. I like having a heads up when I can.

I felt God say:

I will humble you, both personally and professionally, but in a good way.

I stopped at the word. Humbling.

I didn’t want to be humbled.

Not that there was anything I was afraid was going to come out. I’ve written openly about my life for thirty years — the failures are already in print, and there was nothing sitting in a closet waiting for daylight.

The dread wasn’t exposure. It was collapse.

But I also read the second part: *In a good way.*

If God was in it, I felt it would eventually turn out all right. I still didn't want to go through any kind of humbling, but I agreed, and said yes. If You're in it, I'd walk through it.

Then there was a second sentence I had written down, before I even had time to analyze the first. I wrote it down and did not take it in at all.

You need to know how much people love and appreciate and care for you. Invite everyone. Invite them all to the party.

He was talking about the celebrations of our marriage that we had planned that fall.

I gave the testimony. The next day, by noon, everything fell apart. My wife left the day after that and I've never seen her again. My head was spinning. *How can this be happening?*

There it was. My confirmation. God had told me He was going to humble me, and by lunchtime the next day my life had come apart, and any reasonable man reading his own journal would draw a line straight between those two dots.

I drew it. I drew it for months.

The Sword

For years I've lived with the sense of a sword hanging over my head.

Not a metaphor I chose. A standing condition. The other shoe is always about to drop, something is always about to come out, and the only thing between me and the drop is whatever I manage to get done today.

That year it got worse, and it got worse in a way I couldn't have predicted, because what set it off was kindness.

After she left, a friend called to say he'd stand up for me. He'd write a letter defending my integrity, he'd back me up, whatever I needed.

I got off that call frightened.

Why would anybody need to write a letter? What's coming that he can see and I can't?

That's the machinery I was running on. A man calls to say he's in my corner, and I hang up scanning the horizon for whatever made him say it.

Somewhere in the middle of all that, in a morning of praying and writing, I got a sentence.

Eric, the sword isn't over your head. It's in your hand.

Two Ways to Be Made Small

I brought all of it to Sharon — the journal entry, the blow-up, the line I'd drawn between them.

She took the word apart, the word *humbling*.

When God humbles someone, she said, it's for an entirely different purpose. It wasn't the kind of humbling I'd just been through, where you feel humiliated.

"That's how people do it."

People humiliate. It's a diminishing thing, usually done so others can see, and the point of it is that you should be less afterward. That's the whole objective. When people humiliate you, they usually aren't trying to prepare you for anything.

Then she gave me a piece of Hebrew.

Part of being humbled, she said, is being made *tender*. He's tenderizing you.

I was surprised, because a woman in my Bible study had said the same word to me that morning. They'd been praying over me, and she told me my heart was being tender-

ized. Pounded, but tenderized. So that I'd be of more use to people afterward.

I'd told her what it felt like from the inside, which was more like being shredded.

She said no. Not shredded.

Two women, in two conversations, on the same day, reaching for the same word about the same heart. I don't know what to do with that except report it.

The pounding is identical either way. A tenderized cut and a shredded one have both been hit, repeatedly, with something heavy. What differs is whose holding the mallet and what they intend to do with it afterward.

Sharon put the promise on the end. God humbles you to exalt you at the end of the process.

At the end of the process. Not instead of it.

The Humbling I Actually Got

I'd minimized it in my own handwriting.

The humbling was the second sentence.

You need to know how much people love and appreciate and care for you.

I'd been braced for collapse. What arrived was affection, in quantities I had no idea how to receive, from people with no particular reason to keep calling who kept calling.

That is humbling. It turns out to be far more humbling than disgrace would have been.

Ruin I had rehearsed. Being told by one person after another that they loved me and weren't going anywhere was something I had made no preparations for at all.

My recovery group leaders said it this way: *Eric, you need to make the best decision for you. Don't worry about what anybody else says.*

My first reaction was to argue with them. *How can you say that? There are so many people to think about.*

I'm a people pleaser. I know how that sounds when a man says it out loud — like a small vice, very nearly a virtue.

But a people pleaser is a man who has arranged things so that a great many people have a vote about him and he has none about himself. What God had in mind wasn't to take those people away from me. It was to sit me still while they told me the truth about how they felt, until I ran out of ways to deflect it.

I was humbled. Just not the way I'd have written it.

The Party

There was supposed to be a party. That's what the second sentence was about, and I didn't understand that until much later.

We had married privately. The plan was two public celebrations afterward — one in her state, before she moved, and one in mine, when she arrived. Her people would meet me. My people would welcome her.

Invite everyone. Invite them all to the party.

So we did. The invitations went out. Two hundred of them, covering about five hundred people counting all the couples and families.

Neither celebration ever happened.

For a long time I read that as one of the cruelest parts of this — that I'd written down an instruction I thought was from God about a party, obeyed it, and then had to live with

five hundred people invited to something that wasn't going to take place.

But the instruction and the reason were sitting in the same paragraph, and I'd only ever attached the reason to the party.

You need to know how much people love and appreciate and care for you.

I did come to know that. Thoroughly. In detail, over months, one text, one email, and one phone call at a time.

Canceling a party wasn't the delivery method I had in mind.

He Says What It's For

When God humbles people in the Bible, He tends to say what it's for. Moses tells Israel to remember how the LORD led them forty years in the wilderness, *to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart* (Deuteronomy 8:2).

To know what was in their heart. Not to publish it. Not to settle anything.

And Peter attaches a promise at the end. Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, *that He may lift you up in due time.*

People's version of humbling has no lifting clause. That's the difference, and it's the whole difference. Humiliation ends where it ends, because leaving you there was the point.

Whatever God is doing when He humbles somebody, He's already said how it finishes.

What You Might Do

If you're braced for something, write down what you're actually expecting. Not the vague dread — the specific scene. Who says what. Who stops calling.

Then set it against what has happened so far. My imagination had a great many people leaving in it. The real thing had almost nobody leaving and a lot of people reaching out.

And if someone tells you they love you and you catch yourself scanning for what's behind it, try saying thank you and letting it sit there uninterpreted.

God said He would humble me, personally and professionally, in a good way.

He did exactly that.

I spent a year flinching at a sword that was in my own hand.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that when You make us small, You do it on purpose, and You've told us what the purpose is. Thank You that You don't diminish someone just for the sake of diminishing them. Lord, for those of us who have been braced for collapse — waiting for the drop, reading kindness as a warning — would You take the sword off our heads and show us what's actually in our hands? Where You are tenderizing us, help us to stop calling it shredding. And where people are trying to tell us that they love us, give us the humility to sit still and receive it, which is harder than it sounds. Thank You that You lift up in due time, and that You said so plainly. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. Read Deuteronomy 8:2-5 and 1 Peter 5:6. In each passage, what reason is given for the humbling, and what is promised

One Slice at a Time

at the end of it? How is that different from being humiliated by a person?

2. Is there a word or a warning you received that you read through fear? Read it again. Is there a second half you skipped?

3. Where has kindness made you suspicious this year? What did you assume was behind it?

4. Write out the scene you've been dreading, in detail. Then write what has actually happened so far. Where do the two differ most?

Chapter 8: A Higher Standard Than God's?

"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel (Malachi 2:16).

Years ago I wrote a book called *15 Tips for a Stronger Marriage*. Tip number four was this:

Never use the "D" word: Divorce. If you're committed to marriage for life, never use the word "divorce," especially as a threat. Some people hold onto that option and use it as a weapon in an argument.

If you're struggling in your marriage, keep your hearts soft and tender by looking for other ways to deal with your problems, whether you look to God, the Bible, prayer, counselors, friends or perhaps even time away. But not divorce.

I meant every word of it. I still think most of it is right.

What I want to tell you is what happened when I sat down and checked it against the Bible after she left.

What I Found on the Legal Pad

I sat down at my desk with my Bible, a legal pad, and an on-line concordance, and looked up every verse about divorce again.

Jesus allowed it under a strict exception, for sexual immorality (see Matthew 19:1-12).

Paul allowed it. If the unbeliever leaves, let them go. You are not bound (1 Corinthians 7:8-16).

Moses allowed it, if a certificate was written. Jesus said it was because of hardened hearts. (see Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Matthew 19:8-9).

Sharon showed me another one I had overlooked. God said Himself that He divorced Israel.

“I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries” (Jeremiah 3:8).

Wow. God divorced Israel?

He gave a certificate of divorce. He sent her away. He didn’t separate, didn’t take a break, didn’t move into the guest room. He divorced her.

Yet when I counseled people, I had been telling them to never even say the word.

My standard for marriage was higher than Jesus’s. Higher than Paul’s. Higher than Moses’s. And higher than God’s.

It wasn’t a high view of marriage. It was my view of marriage, wearing God’s clothes.

What I Handed People

From my earliest days as a Christian I believed God could do anything. That included putting a marriage back together after every person involved had already quit.

I’d watched it happen. I’ve prayed with couples who were finished — some already divorced, some who had ended it over the things the Bible names, adultery among them — and I have watched those same people come back together and build something fruitful out of the wreckage. I’ve seen divorced couples remarry each other.

So I took that as my instruction. Never agree that a marriage is over. Never be the one who stops asking.

That’s what went into my books. That’s what I said in living rooms and on the phone and from a platform. *If God can do anything, then He can do this one, so don’t quit.* Sometimes it worked out. Sometimes it didn’t. I held the standard either way.

I never quoted Malachi at anybody to shame them. I did something gentler and, in a few cases, worse. I told people not to stop hoping, and I kept them hoping well past the point where hope was the thing they needed.

In some of those cases what I handed a person wasn't hope at all. It was a delay.

I delayed paperwork. I may have delayed a divorce, but it's hard to know because divorce starts in the heart, and sometimes that was years before anybody called me. What I extended was the season where a person gets up every morning to resuscitate somebody already gone, and blames themselves at night for failing at it.

Some of them needed permission. I gave them homework.

And one of them said something that stopped me in my tracks. After hearing all that she had been through in her marriage, I told her I was so sorry. And finished by saying, "But I'm still praying that somehow God will help you get back together." She was furious. She said that was like praying she would have to go back into a cage that she was finally getting free from.

I told her I didn't want that for her either and asked what she wanted me to pray for her. She said, "Pray that I'll still be able to love him, regardless of how this works out in our marriage. That's the hardest part for me right now."

That's a prayer I could get behind, and it was kinder than what I had offered.

And it's the prayer I prayed when my own marriage ended.

I had to go back through years of my own counsel, my own preaching, my own books, and ask how much of it was Scripture and how much of it was Eric. And then I had to hold my own rule up against my own marriage, which turns

out to be a different experience than holding it up against somebody else's.

Then I Called Them

After my marriage ended, I reached out to four or five of the couples I'd counseled years back. Some had remarried each other. Some had gone through with the divorce.

I wasn't calling for reassurance. I was calling because I thought I might owe somebody an apology.

They said they appreciated the call, but none of them would take it.

Each of them said some version of the same thing. The high standard was the part that helped. In the months when everybody around them had closed the file — and they had closed it themselves — I was the one still holding the door open, and it mattered that somebody was.

Nobody berated me. Not the ones who made it, and not the ones who didn't.

That isn't an acquittal and I won't use it as one. Their kindness on the phone doesn't tell me my counsel was sound. It tells me they're gracious people.

But it does say something true. God can use what a person knows at the time. He doesn't wait until we've got everything right before He'll work with what we've got.

Nearly forty years of it wasn't wasted. It was incomplete, and I'd been defending the incomplete part the hardest.

A high standard gave those people hope. A standard higher than God's is the thing I couldn't see. Those are two different objects, and the phone calls didn't merge them.

What's changed isn't that I'd stop offering hope. It's that I have a second sentence now, and I never used to have it:

and if it doesn't come back together, you haven't sinned by admitting so, and God is not standing far away from you across the room.

There are one or two of those old conversations I'd hold differently today. Where I get the chance, I intend to say so out loud to the person who sat through the first version.

What She Said

I brought all of it to Sharon.

She'd heard the question before. She said people had been putting it to her for years, and this is what she tells them.

"God hates divorce, but I don't see anywhere where God hates divorced people."

He divorced Israel, she said — same word, every language, whether people want to admit it or not. And the reason He hates it is because of what it does to people. The pain. What it costs them.

Divorce is a thing that happens. A divorced person is a person.

God hates cancer. But that doesn't mean He hates the patient.

He hates it because of what it does to people. Which puts Him on the same side of it as the person it happened to.

The Filing Is Not the Death

Sharon said none of us really know who divorced who. *Divorce starts in the heart*, she said, long before anybody files anything. And no one knows what's in people's hearts, sometimes even our own.

When somebody says *we're getting divorced*, they often got divorced in their heart a long time ago. They're just finally doing something about it.

Then she took me to Paul: *"But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or sister is not bound"* (1 Corinthians 7:15). Obey the laws of the land. If it reaches a point where you can't live with that person, do it legally.

She said people take that verse and hold it over people's heads.

A death certificate is not the cause of death. It's a document that says out loud what already happened.

If Somebody Has Quoted It at You

Let me suggest one thing, and it's small.

Take the verse that's been used on you — the one somebody said in a small group, or in a letter, or across a table at a restaurant. Write it out by hand on a piece of paper.

Then underline every word in it that names an act, and circle every word that names a person.

Do it slowly. Then read the whole chapter that verse lives in, out loud, and find the reason God gives for hating whatever He says He hates.

In Malachi, the reason is what it does to people who get discarded. Read the verses around it and you'll find Him furious on behalf of the one who was discarded, not the institution.

That's not a loophole. It's the point.

And if you've been the one giving the counsel — if you've sat across from somebody and told them to keep trying — do the same exercise with the verses you've been handing

out. Write down what each one actually permits, and to whom, and why.

I still think most of those fifteen tips were right.

The fourth one had a word in it that God Himself has used.

God hates divorce, and for good reason. So do I.

He wrote the certificate anyway.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You know the difference between what we've been through and who we are, even when we've lost track of it ourselves. Thank You that You hate what this has cost us, and that You're not indifferent to it. Lord, we confess that some of what we've been certain about, we never got from You. We built it, we called it faithfulness, and we handed it to people who were already on the ground. Forgive us for that, and undo whatever damage we did with it. Show us what You said and why You said it — not what we were taught, and not what we assumed. And where somebody has been standing in a doorway You left open, would You move them out of the way, even if the somebody is us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. Read Jeremiah 3:1-8. What does God do, and what word does He use for it?
2. How does that sit next to Malachi 2:16?
3. Read Matthew 19:3-9, Deuteronomy 24:1-4, and 1 Corinthians 7:12-16. What does each passage permit, in what circumstance, and what reason is given?
4. Is there a standard you hold that's stricter than what Scripture actually says? Where did you get it, and who has been living underneath it?

Chapter 9: Don't Let Your Demeanor Do the Talking

"Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand" (Ephesians 6:13).

Some months into all of this I had to go and ask people for money.

Not for me. For the work — a Christmas show we take into different cities, about two thousand dollars a city, and a film I've been trying to raise a hundred thousand for. I'd committed to two new cities by the end of the year. The people running it wanted five.

And I had stopped. I'd stopped editing the video I needed to show other theaters, and I'd stopped asking, and I'd stopped booking, for months.

So I asked for half an hour to present to the group. What I was working on, what I'd been derailed from, where it stood.

Nobody funds a man who is finished. That's not cynicism about donors — it's just true, and it's true for good reasons. People give to something going somewhere.

I had to walk into that room and not be a man who was finished, on a morning when finished was the most accurate word available for how I felt.

What I said, and I remember saying it, was: *I feel like I can stand up straight. I've got my shoulders back, and I'm ready to go.*

I had learned that sentence from Sharon a few months earlier.

Impending Doom

What I'd said to her, more than once, was that I felt impending doom.

Not about anything specific. A weather system. The sense that something was coming and that everybody could see it on me.

And I told her I was going to be so embarrassed.

She didn't argue with the feeling. She went somewhere I did not expect.

"Remember, the enemy is not omniscient. Keep reminding yourself he's not omniscient. He has no idea what I'm thinking."

He Knows You by Three Things

Then she gave me the framework.

"He knows me by three things. How you act. How you react. And the things that you say."

That's not mind reading. That's surveillance. It's an observer working from output only, with no access to the room where the decisions get made.

Which means everything he has on me, I handed him.

If the only intelligence available about my interior is what I broadcast, then my face, my posture, my tone on the phone, and the way I answer *how are you* are not incidental. They're the transmission.

Omniscience is an attribute of God alone, not of any creature, and Satan is a creature. Scripture never depicts him reading minds. In Job he observes and infers.

A being with millennia of watching people can predict a man like me frighteningly well without reading a thought. Sharon's own framework concedes this.

Both of those are true.

The first one means the dread I was carrying was not a report from someone who knows. It was a guess, dressed up as a verdict.

The second one keeps me from getting smug about it. A being who has watched a thousand men come apart in exactly the way I was coming apart does not need a confession to make a good guess.

Which leaves me with a smaller enemy than the one I had been picturing. Not a mind reader. An observer working from footage — and I have some say over what gets filmed.

“So no matter how we’re feeling,” she said, “hold your head up high. Don’t let your demeanor let the enemy know how you feel.”

Then: “That’s a hard thing to do. But I’m telling you, your healing speeds up. Everything speeds up. And you feel stronger, because you’re a warrior — whether you feel it or not.”

Which Is Not the Same as Pretending

I’m a man who believes in telling the truth about where I am. There’s a whole chapter later in this book about how badly I want to be authentic and how often I’ve done it fearfully.

So is this instruction telling me to walk around performing a strength I don’t have?

No. And the difference is who the audience is.

Being honest with God about how I feel — that stays. Being honest with the two or three people who have earned it — that stays. Sitting in front of a counselor and saying *I feel impending doom* — that is exactly what I should have been doing, and it's why I had anything to work with.

What Sharon was talking about is a different audience entirely.

Declining to broadcast is not deception. My interior is not public information. There's no obligation to publish it to a room, to a crowd, to an accuser, or to anyone who has already decided what my story means.

You can be completely truthful and still not be a running commentary.

Head Up, Door Open, Not Chasing

Sharon was carrying something of her own at the time — someone who had turned on her and would be telling his side of it to people they both knew.

I'm not going to tell her story here. What I can pass on is what she said she was going to do about it, because she said it to me as instruction.

She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her put down. She'd hold her head up when she saw him.

She'd tell him she was sorry it had gone the way it had, that she'd still pray for him, and that he still had her phone number — if he could talk rightly to her, she'd never turn down his call.

And then: *But I am not going to chase you.*

Head up. Door open. Not chasing.

And underneath all of it: *I don't care what he tells other people. People either know me or they don't.*

The people who know you will weigh what they hear against what they've got. The people who don't know you were never going to be reached by your explanation anyway.

It's a Practice, Not a Switch

None of this happened once and stayed fixed.

Months after that first conversation I was still telling Sharon about a general anxiousness sitting in my gut — that I kept having to put my shoulders back, over and over, saying *okay, Eric, it's all right*, and still feeling it rise. I don't like conflict. I never have.

That's what the instruction actually looks like in a life. Not a transformation. A correction you make repeatedly, the way you'd correct a car drifting on a crowned road.

And I wasn't only getting it from Sharon. That season, people I hadn't spoken to in years started calling out of nowhere — one who said I'd been on his mind for two months and he didn't know why, another who had already heard her side of it and called anyway.

They all said a version of the same thing. Stand up. Shoulders back. Keep going with what God called you to.

After You Have Done Everything

Paul lists the armor, and every piece of it is defensive except one. Belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet — and a sword.

And then he says what it's all for, four times in four verses. Take your stand. So that you may be able to stand your ground. And after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then.

Not to win. Not to advance. Not to feel victorious.

To still be standing there when it's over.

It reads like a battle text. It's an endurance text. The objective is that at the end of the day of evil, the man is still upright and still in the same place.

Which is also, as it happens, a description of demeanor. Standing is a posture before it's an accomplishment.

What You Might Do

Pick the next situation where you'll be seen — the meeting, the service, the aisle at the grocery store where you'll run into someone who has heard something.

Decide two things before you go. What your face is doing. And the one sentence you'll say if you're asked.

Then keep the other thing intact. Find the person, or the counselor, or the hour in the morning where the whole unedited truth still gets said out loud, because a man who broadcasts nothing anywhere is not strong. He's just alone.

And if somebody is telling their version of you around town, you can let them. The people who know you will hold it up against what they know of you. That's what knowing somebody is for.

I didn't feel like a warrior that year.

It turns out nobody asked me to feel like one.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You see all of it — the part we show and the part we can't. Thank You that nothing about us is hidden from You, and that You don't need us to perform for You. Lord, for those of us walking into rooms this week where people have already heard something, would You steady us? Let our heads come up. Give us one sentence to say and the sense to stop there. And keep us honest in the places where

honesty belongs — with You, and with the few people who have earned it — so that standing up straight in public never becomes hiding. Thank You that after we have done everything, You have asked us only to still be standing. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Ephesians 6:10-18. How many times does Paul say the purpose is to stand? What does it change to read this as a passage about endurance rather than conquest?*
- 2. Sharon said the enemy knows us by how we act, how we react, and what we say. Over the last week, what have those three been broadcasting?*
- 3. "People either know me or they don't." Who actually knows you? What does that suggest about how much energy the rest deserve?*
- 4. Where is the place you tell the whole truth out loud? If you don't have one, who could it be — and what would it take to ask them this month?*

Chapter 10: “How Could That Happen to Eric?”

“Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was” (Job 2:13).

At the polling place on election day, a woman I know casually came over to say hello. She’s about eighty. Lovely person. A Facebook friend rather than a close one.

She said, “Oh, I heard you got married. I’m so glad for you.”

I said, “Actually, it didn’t work out.”

She was stunned. And then she said, “But you’re such a nice guy.”

I said something. I don’t remember what.

What I do remember is the next four seconds, because I’ve had them a hundred times since.

I am a nice guy.

Then: *are you changing your opinion of me?*

Then: *“But you were such a nice guy.”* Past tense. Which she hadn’t said. I supplied that myself, in under a second, standing in a fire hall holding a ballot.

Then I went the other way and started putting myself down. *I guess I’m not that nice.*

And then I caught that too. That’s not nice either. That’s not fair.

Four seconds. A kind woman had said something kind, and I’d run it through a machine that turned it into an accusation and then turned the accusation on myself for good measure.

The Other Ones

They kept coming that season, and they all had the same shape.

A friend and supporter of the ministry called and said he couldn't fathom it. *It just looked like God was so in it. We were so happy for you.*

And a couple I'd married years ago — I performed their wedding, they're my own kids' age. One of them said something to someone, who then said it to me: *Eric Elder divorced. How can that even happen? How can that even be possible?*

They weren't condemning me. I knew that even then. I'd counseled them, walked them through their own difficulties, written the book on marriage that they'd read.

I said to Sharon: the word divorce isn't in my vocabulary.

Then I heard myself and added: I mean, it is now.

What She Said

"As hard as it is to look at — that is a compliment for you."

I said I hadn't thought of that.

She went on. "How could that happen to Eric? They're looking at all the value that you have and the people that you've helped. And they mean it in a way that they feel so bad about it. How could it possibly happen to a good man like that?"

I told her she was only saying it because she's my friend.

Then I said: no. I believe you, actually.

She said, "You know I'm bold and honest."

Read the Sentence Again

How could that happen to Eric?

The preposition is the whole thing. *To*. I'm the object of that sentence, not the subject.

Nobody was asking how a man like me could do such a thing. They were asking how a thing like that could land on a man like me.

Those are different sentences. They sound almost identical out loud, especially at a polling place, especially when the man hearing them has already convened a court.

And a compliment is exactly what it is, though it arrives in the worst possible packaging. Their surprise is a measurement. It's the distance between what they'd watched me be for thirty years and what had just happened. The bigger their shock, the higher their estimate of me. It hadn't occurred to me to run it that way.

The Jacket

Sharon told me about a women's seminar she did years ago in Aurora. She could see it in the room — women who had a hard time taking a compliment.

Somebody had complimented her jacket earlier, so she used herself as the demonstration. She said: you like my new jacket?

And answered herself. *It's not new. It's twenty years old. And see this rip here?*

That's what we do, she told them. Somebody hands us something good and we immediately produce the receipt showing what's wrong with it.

I'd done it in the fire hall without breaking stride. *You're such a nice guy* came in, and I had the rip located and pointed out before the woman had finished her sentence.

I do it with my car too. Somebody says they like it and I tell them it's twenty years old and it was a really good deal.

Sharon's instruction was five words. I appreciate that, thank you. And then: keep it simple.

The Lunch

A harder one to sort out came from a friend who's led worship for years, someone I've worked with and admire. I saw him for lunch on my way through his town.

He was shocked, like everybody. And he handled it beautifully. He said I didn't have to tell him anything. He said he didn't need to hear the details of who did what and who said what — he just cared about me and wanted to know how I was doing.

Then he said there was absolutely no judgment on his part. None.

And then, a few minutes later, he said: *thank God you weren't on staff at a church. You'd have been fired the next day for this.*

It didn't bother me in the moment. I took note of it, but we were just talking about everything.

I've turned it over a lot since, because those two things came out of the same mouth inside the same hour. No judgment, and you'd have been gone by morning.

The best I can make of it is that both were true and neither was about me.

He meant the first one. He wasn't judging me.

And the second one wasn't a verdict on my life — it was a report on an institution. It's a man who has spent his career inside church employment saying out loud how thin the ice is under his own feet. Some of what sounds like condemnation is other people's fear, said in your direction because you're the one standing there.

That doesn't make it painless to hear. It does mean I'd been reading a weather report as a sentencing.

Job's Friends Got a Week Right

Job's three friends heard what had happened and came from their own countries to be with him.

When they saw him from a distance they didn't recognize him. They wept, they tore their robes, they threw dust in the air. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights, and nobody said a word, because they could see how great his suffering was.

Seven days of it right.

Then somebody opened his mouth, and the next thirty chapters are those same three men explaining Job's disaster to him, with increasing confidence and decreasing accuracy, until God Himself turns up and tells them they haven't spoken rightly.

The friends who wept for him and the friends who lectured him were the same men. Nothing changed except that they started talking.

That's the lunch. That's the polling place. That's the phone call from the supporter who couldn't fathom it. People who genuinely love you, sitting in the dust with you properly, and then offering you what they've got. Some of it lands. Some of it is clumsy. Nearly all of it is meant well.

The clumsiness doesn't cancel the love, and it isn't a reason for anyone to stay quiet. It just means the weighing is mine to do. I don't have to swallow every explanation whole, and I don't have to refuse the ones that are true.

What You Might Do

The next time somebody says something that lands wrong, try running the sentence back. Most of the time you'll find the person was grieving at you, not prosecuting you.

And when somebody says something genuinely kind, practice taking it without producing the receipt. No *it's twenty years old*. No *see this rip*. Just thank you, I appreciate that.

Nobody was asking how a man like me could do such a thing.

They were asking how a thing like that could happen to a man like me.

I'd only ever heard one of those sentences.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for the people who are shocked on our behalf. Thank You that their surprise is a kind of testimony, even when it lands on us like an accusation. Lord, for those of us who have built a machine that turns every kind word into evidence against us — would You take it apart? Slow us down long enough to hear what was actually said. Give us the grace to receive a compliment without immediately handing back the receipt. And where people who love us reach for an explanation they don't have, help us to keep the love and forgive the explaining, the way You did with Job's friends. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Job 2:11-13, then look at what happens in chapter 4 when Eliphaz starts talking. What changed between those two moments? What were the friends doing right for seven days?*
- 2. Think of a comment that stung this year. Write down the exact words. Read them again slowly. Is that person prosecuting you, or grieving?*
- 3. Sharon's jacket: what's your version of "it's twenty years old, see this rip"? What do you say when someone compliments you?*
- 4. Who has said something clumsy to you that was meant as love? What would it take to keep the love and let the clumsiness go?*

Chapter 11: The Life Preserver With No Hole In It

“Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on a wound, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart” (Proverbs 25:20).

The email began, *I hope you’re sitting down for this.*

It came from a friend I’ve had for decades. She was part of my spiritual life before I had my own footing in it — she’s the one who told me I ought to be baptized, now that I had put my faith in Christ. She knew Lana. She has prayed with me through more things than I can count.

And what she wrote was that if I ever went a different direction on a moral commitment I’ve made about my own sexual integrity, she would support me completely.

She meant it as the kindest thing she could offer me. Like offering a soothing drink to an alcoholic. On the surface it looked like love, but underneath, it absolutely crushed me.

Not because she’d said something cruel. Because of what she must have truly believed for her to say it at all. That after all these years, after everything she’d watched, she didn’t believe the change in me was real or necessary.

She’d read my books. She’d lived a lot of it alongside me. She had seen the transformation up close, over years, and here in writing was the news that she’d been holding a different account of me the whole time.

She was about the tenth.

Ten close friends, over the years, people who have known me a long time, who have moved on that subject and now come at it from the other side. Warm about it. Generous. Certain they’re being loving.

She was the last of the ten and by far the worst, because of who she is to me.

And I need to be fair about them, all ten, because it's the thing that makes this chapter hard rather than simple. Not one of them was trying to betray me. Every single one thought they were doing me good. When I finally said something to her about it, what she said back was: *I don't mean any of that. I just want to say I'm supporting you. I love you, and I'll support you, whatever you decide.*

They were being kind at me with everything they had.

What Sharon Said

She'd heard an analogy years before at a conference she and Chuck were part of, from a preacher up front, and she said she never forgot it. The whole room reacted when he said it.

When somebody has all the answers for you — and a lot of the answers are good ones — you can filter them out. That's fine. That's most of us.

But if they *can't* be filtered out, if they keep coming, then it's like this. They see you drowning. So they throw you a life preserver.

And it hasn't got a hole in it.

There's no opening for your head to come up through. They're throwing it hard, and they're throwing it again, and every time it lands on you it pushes you further under.

And they think they're doing good.

"They really, truly, in their heart, think they're doing the right thing," Sharon said. "And they are totally wrong. What they're doing is making things worse. They're hurting you."

Then: "So you really have to set your limits."

Why It Won't Land

I asked why someone would keep doing this after being told it isn't helping.

Sharon's answer was that the problem is in their minds, not in the message. They believe they know you better than you know yourself. They think they're saving you — bringing you up out of something — when what they're actually doing is pressing down on the top of your head.

That's why the ordinary approach fails. Explaining doesn't work, because they've already accounted for your explanation. If you say you're fine, that's what a man who isn't fine would say. If you say you've thought about it, that's what a man who hasn't would say. There's no statement available to you that comes out the other side intact.

You cannot reason with someone who has decided that your disagreement is a symptom.

The Trap

I said to Sharon that this is exactly what has happened to me in multiple situations with multiple people.

If I push back — if I put my hand up and say stop — it looks like I've been caught. They'll think they've hit a nerve. *Well, obviously this is a problem for Eric, look at the reaction I got.* And then the reaction becomes the evidence.

I told Sharon I didn't know how to say it without it turning back on me. Without somebody deciding: *no wonder his marriage ended, look how he responds to his own friends.*

Sharon said something, repeatedly.

"The issue is theirs. The issue is theirs."

And later, in case I'd missed it: "The issue here, Eric, is not yours. It's theirs."

What to Actually Say

Then she told me what I can actually say instead, without raising the temperature.

I don't have an issue with this in my life. It's a non-issue for me. But it seems like you have an issue with my not receiving it back into my life. Why is that?

It doesn't argue the conviction. It doesn't defend anything. It observes, out loud and pleasantly, that only one person in the conversation is agitated, and it isn't the one being pressed.

Sharon also told me what to do when the reply comes back beginning with but.

Say no. Again. And ask again: *why are you doing this when I'm telling you no?*

"Some arguments of the heart or the head," she said, "you have to treat like children. You go over and over and over, until they listen to you instead of impose on you."

The Friend Who Meant It Best

Peter had just been told he was blessed, that flesh and blood hadn't revealed it to him, that on this rock the church would be built. It's the high-water mark of his life so far.

Minutes later Jesus starts explaining that He's going to Jerusalem to suffer and be killed.

And Peter takes Him aside, privately, the way a good friend does it, and says: *Never, Lord! This shall never happen to You!*

That's love. There's nothing else in it. Peter is not scheming. He has just heard that the man he adores is walking toward his own death and he is trying, with everything in him, to prevent it.

The answer he gets is a strongly worded no. *Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.*

The rebuke isn't for malice. It's for a well-meant hand on the arm, pulling in the wrong direction.

You can say a hard no to someone who loves you, whose motives are entirely good, without that no being a failure of the friendship. Peter stayed. He was there at the end and after the end. The no did not cost Jesus the man.

What You Might Do

If there's someone throwing you a preserver with no hole in it, you can stop trying to change their mind about you. That was never on offer.

Decide your sentence before the next conversation, and keep it short. *I don't have an issue with this. But it seems like you have an issue with my not doing what you'd like. Why is that?*

Then hold it. When the *but* arrives, say no again. Not louder, just again. People who impose have usually never been outlasted.

And separate the two things that come tangled together, because they are separable. Their motive can be pure and their effect can be drowning you. You don't have to choose one of those to believe.

Ten preservers, over the years, thrown by people who love me.

Not one of them had a hole in it.

I'm still swimming.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for the people who love us badly and love us anyway. Thank You that You know the difference between a motive and an effect, even when we can't hold both at once. Lord, for those of us being pressed by someone certain they know us better than we know ourselves — give us a short sentence and the steadiness to say it again. Take away our need to be understood by everybody before we can be at peace. Where a friend has hurt us while meaning well, help us to keep the friend. And where we ourselves have thrown something heavy at somebody who was already going under, forgive us, and teach us to ask before we throw. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Matthew 16:15-23. What had Peter just been commended for, and what does he say a few verses later? What does it tell you that the rebuke was aimed at good intentions?*
- 2. Who in your life is certain they know what you need? What happens when you disagree with them — does your disagreement get treated as information, or as a symptom?*
- 3. Write your one sentence. Not an argument, just an observation about who in the conversation is actually troubled. Say it out loud until it sounds calm.*
- 4. Where have you been the one throwing? Is there someone you've been helping past the point where they asked you to stop?*

Chapter 12: Know What You're Going to Say Before You Say It

"Out of His mouth came a sharp, double-edged sword... When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead. Then He placed His right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid'" (Revelation 1:16-17).

There's an old story about a courtier named Damocles who told his king how enviable his life must be. The king offered to trade places for a day.

So Damocles took the throne, and the feast was laid out, and everything was exactly as splendid as he'd imagined. Then he looked up.

There was a sword hanging over the chair, point down, suspended by a single hair.

Nobody else at the table could see it, except the king, who told him he sees it every moment — the threats to the kingdom that are there every day. Nothing about the food or the music or the servants had changed. But he couldn't eat, and before the day was out he asked to go back to being who he'd been.

I have lived my whole life at that table.

Not over anything in particular. It's a standing condition — the sense that something is suspended above me by a thread, and that it will drop the moment I stop managing it.

Two Corrections

That year, in a morning of praying and writing, I got a sentence I wrote down and kept.

Eric, the sword isn't over your head. It's in your hand. And you can use it.

There were things I needed to write.

Then, before a hard conversation with her a few days later, a second one.

Now lay your sword down. This is not a fight.

Both of those were about what to do with words. The thing I'd been afraid of and the thing I'd been given turned out to be the same object.

The Sentence Sharon Gave Me

Early on, I told Sharon about a phone call that had gone badly. I'd stayed in it long after it stopped doing anybody any good, and I came off it wrung out.

She listened to the whole account and then handed me one line to say if a conversation started going south again: *Well, I think it's time for me to leave.*

I told her I was writing it down. There may be a moment I need to leave, and I hadn't known there was a sentence for it.

That's the smallest possible version of the discipline this chapter is about, and it's the one I'd recommend anybody start with. You don't have to win the conversation. You don't have to be understood before you go. You need one neutral sentence that ends it, decided in advance, so you're not composing under fire.

Her whole instruction is one line: know what you're going to say before you say it.

And the reason, in her words: *it'll hit you twice as hard if you don't have a plan.*

That's not about eloquence. It's about load. The same words land differently on a man who chose them last week than on a man improvising them while his pulse is going.

The Letter

When I finally sent the divorce papers, I wrote what went with them first.

I had talked to my kids all through the Thursday. I made the decision Friday. And what I sent said this:

I love you very much. I care about you very much. I think about you all the time, and have since the day I met you. But the pain is more than I can carry. So I'm including papers for a joint dissolution of our marriage. I filled them out according to our agreement, and I've included a check to cover the fees. You can sign and date them on page fifteen and drop them off at the government center — only one person is needed to deliver them.

I believe this is the most loving thing I can do.

Every sentence of that was written down before it was sent. None of it was composed in the moment.

It wasn't a demand, it was a release. If she didn't want to be with me, I wasn't going to hold her to it.

I texted my friends that morning to say the papers were on their way. I used the same phrase with them. *I believe this is the most loving thing I can do right now.*

The Sword in the Mouth

Weeks went by. She hadn't signed. She hadn't spoken to me in about six weeks — she'd hung up on me, stopped taking my calls. She was shutting the door and keeping it shut.

One night around ten o'clock, tired, I was reading and asking God for something personal rather than something for anybody else. And I came to the passage in Revelation where John sees Jesus in a vision and there's a sharp double-edged sword coming out of His mouth.

Then, immediately after: *Do not be afraid*. The version I was reading put it as *do not yield to fear*.

I have always thought that was a strange picture. That night I asked whether He was telling me the sword was also in my mouth. That I actually needed to speak to her.

What I was hearing alongside it was *go for the heart*.

And my honest reaction was that this couldn't be right, because she wasn't going to talk to me, and I wasn't sure I could hold a conversation with her if she did. I also knew what a wise counselor would say. Don't send a text. Don't do this to yourself.

The next morning I woke up with the resolution to do it, and it was not complicated.

I could write down what I'm going to say. Do the script. Say that, and say only that.

So I texted and asked if she'd want to talk. To my surprise, she said yes. Twelve fifteen.

What I Actually Did

I wrote it out.

Three main points, circled, so I could find them if I lost my place. Then alternates branching off each one, because I didn't know how she'd respond and I didn't want to be inventing anything.

The hardest part of writing it was that I couldn't script her side. So I stopped trying to address everything and got clear on the one thing I actually wanted: for her to sign the papers.

Then, on the call, I told her what I was doing.

I said I'd been going to text her, but I'd rather talk and hear her voice — and that I was going to read her what I'd written. Saying that out loud took the awkwardness out of it entirely. I wasn't performing spontaneity. I was reading, and she knew I was reading.

This can't be a surprise to you. Things couldn't continue the way they were going. This is the most loving thing I can do right now, and it's the most loving thing you can do for me.

She had texted me not long before about how much she loved me, so I said that too, and meant it. That I loved her very much. That I cared about her and thought about her all the time.

And then the line I was least sure about, which was in the script and which I nearly skipped: *I think I'm going to be able to love you better from afar.*

She said, *that's not the answer I was hoping for. But if that's what you feel is best, then there's nothing else I can do about it.*

I had spent seven months learning that words and calendars don't always agree. When they disagree, believe the calendar.

I said I did believe it was best, for her and for me, for both our sakes, and that it was why I'd taken the action.

Twenty minutes. I didn't deviate.

There were things she said in that call that I would have had to answer if we were still married. I didn't have to answer them, and I sat on my hands, and the conversation ended better than any conversation we'd had in months.

She ended it by saying, "Thanks for doing this by calling and not just texting. I really appreciate it."

There it was. The affirmation that it was time for the words to come out of my mouth, which is exactly what I'd considered in prayer the night before and would never have arrived at on my own. She hadn't been taking my calls.

There's a time and a place for everything. As Ecclesiastes 3:7 says, there's *a time to be silent and a time to speak*.

Why Writing It Down Works

A pen does what a blade does. So does a sentence said out loud at twelve fifteen on a Saturday. Words go in deeper than most of what we're afraid of, and they stay in longer.

That's the argument for writing them first. Not because a script makes you cold. There's nothing colder than a warm man improvising while frightened. It's because something that goes in that deep deserves more thought than you're capable of giving it mid-sentence.

And there's a mercy in it that I didn't expect. With the words decided in advance, I wasn't spending the whole conversation composing. I was free to listen.

What You Might Do

Before the next hard conversation, write three things down.

The one outcome you actually want. Not all of them. One.

Your three main points, and nothing else. Circle them so you can find your place.

And your exit sentence, decided now. *Well, I think it's time for me to leave*. It doesn't have to be clever. It has to exist before you need it.

Then tell the person you're reading it. That single move takes all the strangeness out of it, and it tells them that

what you're about to say was considered rather than fired off.

The sword was never hanging over my head by a thread.

It was in my hand the whole time. A tool, not a weapon. My words — and I could use them, whether written or spoken.

I wrote it down first.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You gave us words, and that You don't treat them as small. Thank You that Your own Son is described with a sword coming out of His mouth, and that the first thing He said afterward was do not be afraid. Lord, for those of us facing a conversation we've been dreading — would You give us the sentences before we need them? Steady our hands long enough to write them down. Give us one clear thing to ask for. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Revelation 1:12-18. What comes out of His mouth, and what does He say to John immediately afterward? What does that pairing suggest about the weight of words?*
- 2. Is there a conversation you've been putting off? Write down the one outcome you actually want from it — a single sentence, not a list.*
- 3. What's your exit line? Decide it now, while nothing is happening, and say it aloud until it sounds ordinary.*
- 4. Think of a conversation that went badly. Were you composing while you were in it? What would you have said differently if you had written it down first?*

Chapter 13: You Can Trust Your Honesty

“Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body” (Ephesians 4:25).

Eventually I wrote three sentences and sent them out, one person at a time, by text, to nearly everybody I know.

Dear friends, I'm sorry to tell you that my wife and I have decided to cancel our celebrations this fall, and she won't be moving here after all. I can chat more about it sometime, but right now I need some time to heal. I appreciate all your love and care, thoughts and prayers.

It took me months to get to those three sentences.

Look at what's in there. The fact, stated clearly. No reason given. Nobody blamed. An open door for later, and a plain request for room right now.

And look at what isn't in there. No explanation of who did what. No case. Nothing that requires the reader to take a position, and nothing I would have to keep straight in my head afterward.

I sent it individually rather than as a post, because these were the same people who'd been invited to a celebration, and it seemed to me that if they'd been invited one at a time they ought to be told one at a time.

Why I Wasn't Talking

I had reasons, and they sounded good.

I didn't want to be the man airing his marriage. I didn't want anybody choosing sides. I had a ministry with thousands of people on the other end of it who I had told I got married, and I couldn't think of a way to tell them that didn't feel like dredging up the details.

So I said nothing, or nearly nothing. *We're going through a rough patch.* That was my line for months.

And in the silence, a version of me went out into the world without me.

Somebody I met casually a couple times wrote publicly that I was a crybaby. His point, as best I could follow it, was that if I thought heart surgery and losing my first wife were hard, I ought to try going to Vietnam and watching a friend's face get blown off.

The strange part wasn't the cruelty. It was how far off the facts he was, and how confidently. I'm not crying about Lana. I'm not crying about the heart surgery. I made my peace with both of those a long time ago, in public, in books people can read.

He'd been handed a version of me and was responding to it faithfully. He just had the wrong man.

And the only reason a wrong version was circulating unopposed is that I hadn't said anything.

And my friends had backed me up on it. Their counsel at first was to wait — wait until you've had more time to heal, and then you can start telling people.

Then it changed.

They came back and said I needed to start now. Because people were trusting her based on my trust in her, and they didn't know anything had changed, and that wasn't fair to my friends.

I had been thinking of my silence as a kindness I was extending. Nobody had suggested to me that it might be something I was doing *to* people rather than *for* them.

What She Said

I brought the whole tangle to Sharon. How do I tell people. How much. When.

She said, “Don’t be afraid to be that honest with the people you know. You can trust your honesty.”

I asked her to say it again.

She said it again. “Be honest, because you can trust your honesty.”

I told her I was writing it down, and I did.

Her words helped take the whole problem apart. I’d been treating honesty as something risky that needed managing — a substance to be measured out carefully in case it did damage. She was telling me it was the one thing in the situation I could actually rely on.

Don’t Make Excuses

Then she said the part that named what I’d actually been doing.

“If you try to make excuses for her, or for the situation, that’s not healthy for you.”

That’s what my rough-patch line was. Not discretion. An excuse, constructed on the spot, every time, in slightly different words depending on who was asking.

And it was a second job. Every conversation required me to build something, remember what I’d built, and keep it consistent with what I’d told the last person. I was tired all the time that year and I attributed all of it to grief.

Some of it was grief. Some of it was maintenance.

The honest sentence takes about ninety seconds and requires nothing afterward. There's nothing to remember, because you didn't make anything up.

Sharon's version was two moves. Let the first part come out. Then, if you feel they can handle it, or that you can trust them, you tell them the second part.

Two parts. Not one long confession and not a wall.

What Happens When You Do It

Something I did not anticipate: my honesty released other people's.

The moment I started telling friends what was actually going on, they started telling me things they'd been carrying for months and hadn't known what to do with. Concerns they'd had. Things they'd noticed and said nothing about, because I seemed happy and who wants to be the one.

Sharon had told me this would happen. She said I'd be surprised how many people had had concerns.

I sat there apologizing to them, which was its own odd experience. *I'm sorry. I really didn't know it had been hard on you too.*

That's what she meant about it setting them free. My silence hadn't only left me isolated with it. It had left everyone who loves me holding their own private version, alone, unable to compare notes with anybody, including me.

And I felt lighter. Not relieved because it was easy. Lighter because there was nothing left to keep up.

Members of One Body

Paul tells the Ephesians to put off falsehood and speak truthfully to their neighbor, and then he gives a reason that isn't the one you'd expect.

Not because lying is wrong, though it is. Not because you'll be found out, though you will.

For we are all members of one body.

It's an anatomical argument. A body works because information moves through it. If a nerve stops reporting pain, that isn't discretion — the hand goes on resting on the stove.

That reframed my silence entirely. I'd been treating my situation as private information that belonged to me and that I was generously not burdening anybody with. Paul is saying the people around me are not an audience I'm protecting. They're the body I'm part of, and they were trying to function on bad information because I wouldn't send a signal.

What You Might Do

Say the true sentence once this week, to one person who has earned it.

Not the whole account. The first part. Something like: *it didn't work out, and it's been one of the hardest year of my life.* Then stop and see what they do with it.

Afterward, notice what you have to keep track of. The managed version needs maintenance forever. The true one doesn't.

And if there's a wrong version of you circulating, you can let go of correcting the strangers. You'll never catch them. Tell the people who actually know you, and let them hold the accurate one.

The managed version had been taking me months.

The honest version was three sentences long.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You already know all of it. Nothing we've managed or left unsaid has ever changed what You see. Thank You that You made us members of one body, and that You meant the information to move. Lord, for those of us who have gone quiet — who have called it discretion when it was really fear — would You give us one honest sentence and one person to say it to? Take away the second job of keeping our stories straight. Where people have been carrying concerns about us in silence, let the truth set them free too. And where a wrong version of us is out there traveling without us, help us to stop chasing it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Ephesians 4:25. What reason does Paul give for speaking truthfully? How does the picture of one body change what your silence has been doing?*
- 2. What's your rough-patch line — the thing you say to keep a conversation moving? Write it down and read it back. What is it protecting, and who is it protecting?*
- 3. How tired are you after a conversation where you gave the managed version, compared with one where you told the truth? What has that difference been costing you?*
- 4. Name one person who has earned the first part. When will you tell them?*

Chapter 14: The Elevator Answer

“He plied Him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer” (Luke 23:9).

A friend of mine had been hopeful about my marriage.

He had started a relationship but was cautious about going forward. He’d watched me get married again late in life and taken it as evidence. If it could go right for me, at sixty, after everything, then the odds weren’t as grim as he’d feared.

Then he heard, and he asked me about it, and I said, “Let me think for a second how to respond.”

Out loud. To a friend. In the middle of a conversation.

What I finally said was that we all have different walks with God, and that whatever God was doing in his relationship was different from what He’d been doing in mine. That I was glad he’d been hopeful. That I still had a lot of hope for my own future.

All of that was true and none of it was an answer.

Then I stalled, because I had three things going at once and no way to hold all three.

I didn’t want to rehash the whole account out loud, or in my head, which is where rehashing it can do sometimes do the most damage.

I didn’t want him filling in the blanks himself, because I could only imagine the various things he might put in the blanks.

And I had no idea what he’d already heard, or from whom.

What She Said

Sharon has a name for the thing I needed. She called it the elevator answer — you’ve got a few floors, not an afternoon.

“Sometimes the easiest thing to do in that case, the elevator thing, is to use the *we* term.”

Then she suggested the wording.

We came to the realization that we were just not right for each other, and we have both learned a lot through this.

And then the reason: “If you use *we*, they won’t pry as hard.”

That’s not manipulation. It’s grammar doing work. *She* left me invites a follow-up question, because there’s obviously a story attached. I left her invites a different one. *We* closes the loop. There’s nowhere for a decent person to put their next question, so they say they’re sorry and ask how you’re holding up, which is the conversation you actually wanted.

Is “We” Honest?

I pushed back on this, because it matters.

I’d been going round and round in my own head about it. Did she divorce me, or did I divorce her? On paper it was a joint dissolution — if she signed the same document I signed, then it was a mutual decision, and I could honestly say *we*.

But I knew what I felt underneath, which was that she had left, and that I’d been the one who finally acted.

Sharon’s answer was what I gave you before, “Divorce starts in the heart.”

Long before anything is filed. Long before anyone announces anything. By the time there’s a document, the thing

the document describes has already happened, usually in both people, usually over a long time.

What I said back was the truest version I have: she gave me the opening to finally do what I'd felt I needed to do eight months earlier. I should have stepped out then. I didn't, because I wanted to work it out.

Sharon said, "That was fine. And that was right, in your case."

So *we* holds up. It isn't a softened version of the truth. It's a shorter one.

The Three-Minute Version

Some people get more than the elevator. Not many, but some — and for them there's a longer answer that still doesn't require an autopsy.

Sharon's thought for it was this: I really don't want to speak against her, and I don't want to go into details, but there were circumstances that didn't surface right away. Once they surfaced, they became insurmountable.

Three things are happening in there.

It says something real. Circumstances existed. They were serious enough to end a marriage.

It declines, out loud, to make a case. *I don't want to speak against her* is doing double duty — it protects her, and it tells the listener that pressing further would be asking me to do something I've just said I won't.

And it explains the timing, which is the question people are actually chewing on. Not *what happened* so much as *how did you not know*. Things that don't surface right away answers that without a single detail.

When They Won't Let It Go

Then there's the friend who has decided that what you need is to talk.

They mean it kindly. They may be right in general and wrong today. And they'll press, because getting you to open up feels to them like the loving thing to do.

Sharon's line for that one costs almost nothing to say.

You smile, and you say: *I'm fine. I'm all talked out.*

That's it. It isn't cold, it isn't a rebuke, and there's no argument in it. It also happens to be true most of the time — I'd usually just come from an hour of talking about exactly this with someone whose job it is.

He Didn't Answer Herod

Jesus in front of Pilate answers the direct question. *Are you the king of the Jews?* He says so. Then the chief priests pile on with accusations and He says nothing at all, and Pilate is amazed.

Then Herod, who had wanted to meet Him for a long time and was hoping to see a miracle, questioned Him at length.

He plied Him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer.

Not one word. To a king. Who had the power to release Him.

I'm not putting my situation next to that one. What I take from it is narrower: the volume of questions doesn't establish anyone's right to answers. Herod asked a great many. He wasn't owed a single reply, and the silence wasn't dishonest.

Some questions are asked by people who need to know. Some are asked by people who want to watch.

What You Might Do

Write your elevator answer this week.

We came to the realization we weren't right for each other, and we've both learned a lot. Use it, or write your own, but keep the we if you honestly can.

Then write the three-minute version for the handful of people who'll get it. Something didn't surface right away. When it did, it couldn't be fixed. You'd rather not speak against anyone.

And keep one sentence in your pocket for the friend who won't stop digging. *I'm fine. I'm all talked out.* Smile when you say it.

Most people are asking a two-floor question.

I kept answering as though we had the whole building.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that Your Son knew when to answer and when to say nothing, and that His silence was never a lie. Lord, for those of us who freeze when somebody asks — give us a short sentence we can say without flinching. Take away the feeling that we owe an account to everyone who asks for one. Help us protect the people who aren't in the room to speak for themselves. And where somebody presses because they love us and don't know what else to do, give us a kind way to close the door, and no guilt afterward for closing it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. Read Luke 23:6-12 and Mark 15:1-5. When does Jesus answer, and when does He stay silent? What seems to determine which?

One Slice at a Time

- 2. Write your elevator answer. Read it aloud three times. Does any part of it invite a follow-up question you don't want?*
- 3. Can you honestly say "we"? If not, what's the shortest true sentence you can say instead?*
- 4. Who in your life keeps pressing you to talk? What would it cost you to smile and say you're all talked out — and what has it been costing you not to?*

Chapter 15: Not Everyone Gets the Whole Story

“But Jesus would not entrust Himself to them, for He knew all people” (John 2:24).

One of the best phone calls I got that year lasted about four minutes.

A friend called and said he wasn’t asking for details. He didn’t need to know what happened or who did what. He just wanted to know if I was okay.

That was the entire call. He asked his question, he listened to the answer, he told me he loved me, and he hung up.

He’d asked a question with its own limit built into it. I didn’t have to decide anything. I didn’t have to work out how much he could handle or what he’d do with it or who he’d tell. He’d done that work for me before he dialed.

I would have told that man anything.

The Other Kind

Then there are the calls where you can feel someone leaning in.

Nothing improper. Nothing you could point at. Just a series of questions, each slightly past the last, and a sense that the conversation isn’t finished until they have the whole thing.

Sharon has a word for what that is. She calls it sidling up.

Sidling up is approaching someone softly for their own gain.

And she said the same thing operates around a crisis, though what people want from that is harder to name. It isn’t money and it isn’t access.

“There’s always that one or two who want the details, so that they can feel they’re closer to you than somebody else. And so they slowly get closer and closer.”

Closer Than Somebody Else

Knowing the inside version means being on the inside. In a circle of people who all know that something happened, the one who knows what happened occupies a different position, and everybody can feel it, including them.

Sharon said it makes them feel they hold a privileged position — that they can come to you with things, or spot you looking sad, or follow you around waiting to be the one who comforts you.

I don’t think most people doing this are calculating. I think it feels like closeness from the inside. But the effect is that your worst year becomes a kind of currency, and you’re the one issuing it.

Counselor, Not Confidant

Then Sharon said a sentence about herself, which is why it landed.

“When they want to be your confidant — I’m your counselor. I’m not your confidant. You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to tell me.”

The woman I’d asked to counsel me was telling me she had no claim on all of it.

If she doesn’t have automatic rights to the whole story, nobody in my life does. Not my closest friends. Not people who’ve known me thirty years. Not people who love me and are worried and mean every bit of it.

You'll Choke on It

Sharon gave me one more piece, and it's about pace rather than about audience.

You can choke on your own subject, she said, if you take it in its fullness all at once and try to explain the whole thing. Because you can't explain it. They didn't walk your walk.

So do it slowly, and at intervals. Don't feel you need to sit down at a table and make it the conversation for the night.

I'd been doing exactly that. Somebody would ask, and I'd feel the pressure to deliver a complete account in one sitting — beginning, middle, and end, in an order that made sense, with enough context that they'd understand. It sometimes exhausted me, and I'm not sure if people ever actually understood it any better for having the long version.

They didn't walk your walk. They weren't in your shoes.

So it is not your responsibility to make anybody feel better about your divorce. That's Sharon's, almost word for word. You've shown what mercy and grace you could, and that doesn't stop the pain, and you are not obligated to spend what's left of your strength managing other people's feelings about your life.

He Didn't Entrust Himself

Jesus is in Jerusalem at the Passover, doing signs, and many people believe in His name.

Then: *But Jesus would not entrust Himself to them, for He knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for He knew what was in each person.*

These aren't opponents. They're believers. They're on His side, and He does not hand Himself over to them.

The same pattern runs all the way through. Crowds got parables. The twelve got the explanations. Three of them went up the mountain and into the garden.

Nobody has ever accused Jesus of being closed off or of failing to love the crowd. He fed them, healed them, wept over them, and died for them.

Graduated disclosure isn't a modern coping technique. It's how He conducted Himself.

What You Might Do

Sort the people in your life into three groups, on paper if it helps.

The few who get the whole thing — and it likely may be a very short list, maybe two or three names.

The larger group who get a real answer that isn't the whole thing.

And everybody else, who get your elevator sentence and your genuine warmth, which is not a lesser gift.

Then give yourself two permissions. You can move somebody between groups. And you don't have to explain to anybody which group they're in.

If you're the one asking, ask the way my friend did. Say out loud that you don't need to know the details. Say you just want to know if they're okay.

I don't need to know everything.

That's the man I'd have told anything.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for the people who ask us how we are and mean only that. Thank You that Your own Son kept counsel — that He loved the crowd completely and confided in three,

and that no one has ever called Him distant for it. Lord, for those of us who feel we owe an account to everyone who asks — would You take that weight off? Give us the discernment to know who is asking for us and who is asking for themselves, and the grace not to think badly of either one. Keep us from choking on our own story trying to explain what can't be explained. And make us, when it's our turn to ask, the kind of friend who says that we don't need to know everything. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read John 2:23-25. Who are the people Jesus won't entrust Himself to? What does it change to see that He withheld Himself from believers, not enemies?*
- 2. Make the three lists. Who actually gets the whole story? Was that list built on purpose, or did people work their way onto it?*
- 3. Has anyone been sidling up? What do you think they're getting from the details — and can you name it without deciding they're a bad person?*
- 4. Think of the last time you gave someone the long version. How did you feel afterward, and did they understand it any better than they would have from three sentences?*

Chapter 16: Be Issue-Minded and You'll Ruin the Relationship

"Let's not have any quarreling between you and me... Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company" (Genesis 13:8-9).

I told a friend that she had taken all my words away from me.

Every word I might have used to describe what happened had already been used about me first. So there was no vocabulary left that wouldn't sound like a schoolyard.

If I said the situation had been hard on me, I was echoing. If I reached for any of the words that fit, I'd be handing anyone listening a reason to think I was just repeating what had been said about me, in the other direction, like a child.

I felt mute in a very specific way. Not that nobody would listen. That there was nothing left to say that would land as anything but tit for tat.

My friend's answer was that I needed to speak the truth to myself, at least. That if I wasn't even telling myself the truth, that was its own kind of lying.

So that's where the truth went. Into my own head, and into a few rooms with the door shut, and nowhere else.

What I Wanted Instead

I wanted the record straight.

Not revenge. I want to be exact about that, because they're different appetites and I know the difference. I didn't want anybody punished. I wanted the facts, correctly ordered, understood by the relevant people.

I wanted the friends who'd heard one version to hear the other one. I wanted the ones who'd gone quiet to know why. I wanted, if I'm honest, one particular conversation with one particular person where the whole sequence finally got laid out and they said: *oh. I see it now.*

That conversation is imaginable in every situation like this, and it doesn't happen often.

What She Said

Sharon has a line she's been saying for years. She told me it's her favorite thing she says, and she said a pastor once quoted it from the pulpit — *someone very wise once said* — while looking directly at her.

"If you're going to be issue-minded, you're going to ruin the relationship."

And the mechanics underneath it: "You spend your life trying to convince their side to come to your side."

It describes an activity with no end condition. There's no point at which their side arrives on your side and the work is finished. You just keep spending.

She pointed out that it isn't a divorce phenomenon. We all find ourselves being issue-minded in politics, or with family. We get so engrossed in the issue that we ruin the relationship, and then we still have the issue and no relationship.

They're never going to know everything. They didn't walk in the shoes, they didn't live in the house. There is no way for somebody else to get hold of it — and all the trying does is get you thinking about it more, and more involved in it.

The record cannot be set straight. Not because people are unfair, but because a record like that doesn't exist in a form that can be handed over.

What I Did Instead

When I finally had the conversation where I asked her to sign the papers, I'd written down what I wanted to say. One part of it had nothing to do with the divorce at all.

I had built her website. I ran her email through it. I'd helped get her videos uploaded and helped with the technical end of the book she wanted to publish. All of that was sitting in my hands, and it mattered a great deal to her.

So I said I'd like to be friends. That I'd like to keep helping her with the website and the videos and the book — either get them into her hands properly or find someone to take them over. That we were both called to ministry, that I didn't think we could do it together, and that I'd still like to help.

And I said the honest limit out loud: if the rest of this was going to be a difficult process to wrap up, then that wouldn't be possible.

I had no other motive in it. What I actually wanted was to be able to love her for the rest of my life, even if our relationship ended.

I did not want our last conversation to be an accusation and a hang-up. That was the alternative on offer, and it was the one we were headed for.

None of that set anything straight. She still has her version. Some people still have hers and not mine. I gave up the only thing I might have gained by arguing, which was being understood correctly by everybody.

What I got instead was the ability to think about her without my jaw tightening.

Abraham Had the Better Claim

Abraham and Lot were rich enough that the land couldn't carry both of them, and their herdsmen started fighting.

Abraham had every right in that situation. He was the elder. He was the one God had made the promise to. Lot was there because Abraham had brought him. If the thing had gone to arbitration, Abraham wins on every count.

What he says is: *Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are close relatives.*

Then he gives away the choice. The whole land is in front of you. If you go left, I'll go right. If you go right, I'll go left.

Lot looks out over the well-watered plain, takes the best of it, and goes.

Abraham loses the argument he never had, and he does it on purpose, and he's the one still standing there when God tells him to look north and south and east and west because all of it is his.

The "issue" was who had the better claim to the land. The relationship was his nephew. He picked the nephew, and he was right to, and it cost him something real at the time.

What You Might Do

Notice when you're rehearsing. The imaginary conversation where they finally understand — you might catch yourself in it.

When you catch it, ask what the actual goal is. If the answer is *for them to see it correctly*, you can put it down, because that outcome isn't purchasable at any price you can afford.

Then find the one thing you can still offer the person you're estranged from, and offer it with whatever limit you honestly need. It doesn't have to be large. It has to be real.

And keep telling yourself the truth, out loud, in private, even when you can't say it anywhere else. Being unable to make your case in public is very different from having no case. Don't lose track of the second one while you're accepting the first.

I never did get the record straight.

I got to keep loving her instead.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You know the whole of it, in order, without anybody having to explain it to You. Thank You that You don't need us to win an argument in order to be on our side. Lord, for those of us rehearsing a conversation that will never happen — would You let us set it down? Take away the appetite to be understood by everyone. Show us the one thing we can still offer to someone we've lost, and give us the courage to offer it with no strings on it. And where we can't say the truth out loud to anybody, help us to keep telling it to ourselves and to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Genesis 13:5-18. What claim did Abraham have, and what did he do with it? What does he receive after Lot leaves?*
- 2. Whose side are you trying to bring over to yours? What would it actually take, and is that available?*
- 3. Describe the imaginary conversation you keep rehearsing. Who's in it, and what do they finally say? What does writing it down do to it?*

4. What's one thing you could still offer the person you're estranged from — with an honest limit attached? What has kept you from offering it?

Chapter 17: Hands Off the Wheel

“But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile” (Exodus 2:3).

Something would come across my screen and I’d be running scenarios inside ten seconds.

Not deliberately. It was more like a machine starting up. *If she says this, I’ll say that. If she does nothing, then in two weeks I’ll do this. If she calls, here’s how the first thirty seconds go. If it goes badly, here’s my line.*

I could do an hour of that without noticing an hour had passed.

And every bit of it felt like diligence. Like preparation. Like a responsible man thinking ahead so as not to be caught flat-footed by a situation that had already caught him flat-footed before.

I described some of this to Sharon, expecting her to help me plan better.

She said, “I’ll be honest with you. All the scenarios you’re going to have in your head are simply keeping a tow line between you and her.”

I said, a tow line? Like on a boat?

“Yeah. You can’t get rid of it.”

She said I needed to unhook it.

“Unhook the tow line.”

What a Tow Line Is

A tow line isn't a memory of a boat. It's a working connection with tension in it, right now, doing something.

That's what the scenarios were. Not thoughts about the past — active rope, maintained daily, keeping me at a fixed distance from a boat I had decided not to be in.

And it explains the thing I couldn't account for, which is why all the planning didn't always produce peace. It wasn't supposed to. Every scenario I ran was a length of rope I was paying out and then hauling back in, and the whole exercise required her to stay in the water in front of me.

The Man Who Came Aboard

Sharon and Chuck took a cruise to Alaska, up through the fjords. Not a boat. A ship, thousands of people on it, and the channel between those walls is narrow.

They had drawn the captain's table that trip. Everything here came from the man who had to give up the wheel.

She recounted the story about letting go of what we're holding onto. In this case it was the wheel of a ship.

A small boat came alongside and a man climbed a rope ladder up the side of the hull. A local. Weathered, rough-looking, not somebody who looked to a passenger like he could bring a vessel that size through a bathtub.

By law he was the only person licensed to move a ship from one end of that water to the other. The only stretch in Alaska where that's true.

So the captain had to hand him the wheel. For one hour, nobody else on that bridge was permitted to touch it.

Then the boat that brought him turned and went back the way it came.

Which is ordinary. It drops its man and leaves. But it does mean that for the next hour there was no sending him back, and no second opinion coming alongside.

An hour later he brought the ship through, jumped over the side, and waved to the passengers.

Nothing happened. That's the whole point. No scraping, no shuddering, nobody's drink sliding across a table. Thousands of people ate dinner through the narrowest water in Alaska and never knew the wheel had changed hands.

Only One of These Is Mine

Two things happen on that bridge, and only one of them belongs to the captain.

One is the passage. Reading water he has never read, at a speed and a distance no instrument on his ship will give him. He doesn't get through the fjords by steering better. He gets through by not steering.

The other is his hands. That's the entire job for that hour, and nobody on board can do it for him.

Mine was a rope rather than a wheel, but it came to the same thing. I held it, quietly, on my end, paying it out and hauling it back a hundred times a week.

And nobody else could let go of it. She couldn't. Sharon couldn't. It was tied off on my cleat, and the only hand that could reach the knot was mine.

Which is the useful part. Bringing the ship through the narrow water is God's work, and I was never qualified for it. Letting go is mine.

The rope and the wheel are the same object anyway. Both of them are whatever my hands won't leave.

Which means I wasn't required to stop caring, or to decide she was a bad person, or to arrive at some emotional state where it stopped mattering. Nothing in that hour asks the captain to feel differently about the water.

He just has to take his hands off.

Was She Going to Be All Right?

One of the ropes I had the hardest time putting down had a question tied to the end of it.

Was she going to be all right?

I could say, and mean it, that I could love her better from a distance. That wasn't where I got stuck. I got stuck on the idea that loving her from a distance still left me holding the job of knowing she'd land somewhere soft. Including financially.

When we got married, we had sat down and gone through everything each of us was bringing into it. Our kids were the ones who wanted it settled. Not because either of us had divorce anywhere in mind, because neither of us did, but because kids think about eventualities, whether death or divorce. So we talked it all the way through, we agreed out loud, and then we put it in writing: whatever each of us brought in would come back to that person, or to that person's estate.

I was walking the country road by my house one day, praying, the first time the word *divorce* sat in my head as something that might really happen. I went through it item by item. What she came in with, what I came in with, retirement, years out.

And what came back to me was that she was going to be okay. Not okay eventually, in some way I would have to engineer. Okay under terms we had already written down and already called okay.

Then I looked at the grass beside the road.

Four-leaf clovers. Not one. Not two. A whole bunch of them.

I've found them here and there all my life, and they have a way of turning up at the hinges. Moses got a burning bush. I get clover.

I pressed them flat and mailed them to her. I didn't explain much. Only that I'd been praying, that I believed God was trustworthy in this too, and that He would go on blessing her the way He always had.

That was the rope going over the side.

Not the money. The money had been decided and signed already. The rope was my needing to be the one who made certain — the standing assignment I had handed myself to personally verify her landing before I'd allow my hands off the wheel.

He could bring her through that passage. I was never licensed for that water.

She Put the Basket in the River

Pharaoh had ordered every Hebrew boy thrown into the Nile. A woman had a son and hid him for three months, and then she couldn't hide him any longer.

So she built him a boat.

She got papyrus and coated it with tar and pitch, which is the part that gets read past. Before she let go of anything, she did the work that was hers to do. She made it hold water.

Then she carried him down to the same river the order had named and set him in the reeds.

Not a lesser danger. The exact danger. She put her son into the water that was supposed to kill him, because the alternative was holding him until somebody came and took him.

His sister stood at a distance and watched. She didn't stop caring. She just stopped carrying.

And the person who lifted him out was Pharaoh's daughter — the household that issued the order, the last hands anyone would have picked. She named him and raised him and paid his own mother to nurse him.

That's the pilot coming over the rail.

What You Might Do

Name one rope. Not the feeling — the rope. The specific thing that has tension on it this week.

Then ask what you would have to know, or see, or be told, before you'd be willing to hand it over. Whatever that answer is, that may be the rope underneath the rope.

Mine was a question, and the answer came on a road with clover in the grass. It might not come that way for you. Ask it anyway.

And when you catch the machine starting up — *if she says this, then I'll say that* — you can name it out loud. *That's rope*. Two words. It's remarkable how much of the hour it gives back.

The scenarios were never preparation.

They were rope.

I've been handing them over ever since, and I'm not finished.

Will you pray with me?

One Slice at a Time

Father, thank You that the narrow water is Yours and not ours. Thank You that You don't ask us to steer a thing we were not built to steer, and that You do not require us to stop caring about somebody before You will take the wheel from our hands. Lord, for those of us still holding rope — still running conversations that will never happen, still braced for the next thing — would You show us where the lines are tied, and remind us that no one else can reach those knots for us? Give us the honesty to name them and the courage to hand them over one at a time, without shame for the ones still in our fists. Thank You that the people we let go of are not falling — they are landing in Your hands. Help us take our hands off the wheel and trust You to bring us through. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Exodus 2:1-10. What did the mother do before she let go, and what did she leave to God? Where is the line between those two in your own situation?*
- 2. Name one rope — the specific thing, not the feeling, that keeps tension between you and the person you're trying to release. What would you have to know before you'd be willing to hand it over?*
- 3. Is there someone whose wellbeing you've quietly made your own standing assignment? What has God already provided for that person that you may not be counting?*
- 4. Where might God be asking you to hand over the wheel? What makes that hard?*

Chapter 18: Fearfully Authentic

“Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe” (Proverbs 29:25).

We were sitting at the kitchen table eating Dove chocolates one morning, shortly after we got married.

I unwrapped mine, and before I looked at the little message printed inside the foil, I said something out loud that had been rolling around in my head for days. I told her I wanted us to be *fearlessly authentic* with each other. No hiding. No managing. No softening things up so they’d go down easier. Just tell each other the truth and trust that the truth could hold us.

Then I flattened out my wrapper and read it.

Be fearlessly authentic.

I turned it around and showed her. She laughed, grabbed a chocolate, unwrapped it, and read hers out loud.

Be fearlessly authentic.

We ate a third. Then a fourth. Same message each time.

We took a picture of all four wrappers lined up on the table. She said that was exactly the kind of marriage she wanted. I said it was exactly the kind I wanted, too.

I meant it. I really did. And for the next several months, I tried as hard as I could.

It went badly almost every single time.

What I Thought I Was Doing

She’d want me to come up for a holiday weekend with her family. I didn’t want to go. So I’d tell her the truth — but I’d tell it like a man walking across a frozen pond.

Well, let me think about that. I mean, I'd like to, it's just that I've got a lot going on that week, and honestly I'm not sure how it would go, because the last time we were all together it felt like — and I'm not saying this is your fault — but it felt like there was some tension around your family, so I guess I'm wondering if it's the best use of, you know, what I'm trying to say is...

By then I'd be four or five minutes in, and I'd have handed her about nine different things to argue with.

And she'd argue with them. Of course she would. I'd just laid out a buffet.

So then I'd back up. I'd clarify. I'd explain that I didn't mean it that way. And every clarification would open up a new front. Pretty soon we weren't talking about the weekend at all. We were talking about whether I'd said something six weeks ago, and whether I'd meant it, and what it revealed about me.

Afterwards I'd sit there feeling like a failure at the one thing I'd asked us both to do. *I was honest, I'd think. I told her the truth, and it blew up anyway. So I guess honesty doesn't work here.*

And the next time, I'd hedge a little more. And the time after that, a little more.

What I Was Actually Doing

I didn't see it until more than a year later, when I finally sat down and wrote out everything that had happened between us.

I was going through it hour by hour, conversation by conversation, and somewhere in the middle of it I stopped and put my pen down.

I wasn't *fearlessly* authentic.

I was *fearfully* authentic.

I was telling the truth — that part was real — but I was doing it soaked in fear. Every sentence came out of my mouth wrapped in three layers of padding, because I was already bracing for what she'd do with it. The content was never the problem.

I know that because there were a handful of times I got it right, and I had no idea how.

One of those times, near the end, she asked about a holiday weekend again. And for whatever reason — maybe I was too tired to be afraid — I just said it.

"No, that weekend won't work for me. Let's plan on the Monday after."

That was it. No preamble, no reasons, no apology, no anxious little laugh at the end.

And she said okay.

She was completely fine. It didn't even register as a conflict. The exact same information that had blown up a marriage's worth of conversations went across the table in nine seconds and landed like a grocery list.

Same truth. Same person. Same scenario. The only thing that changed was that I said it once and let it sit there.

Why Fear Ruins a True Sentence

When I was afraid of her reaction, I over-explained. I was trying to build a case airtight enough that she couldn't possibly be upset, so I kept adding reasons.

Every reason I added was a door.

I'd say, *"I can't come because I'm busy that week."* Now she could prove I wasn't that busy. So I'd add, *"...and it seems*

tense with your family." Now I'd accused her family. Now there was a whole new argument, and it was a worse one.

I was trying to make the sentence safer. What I actually did was hand over the ammunition.

Then when the argument came, I read it as proof that honesty was dangerous — when the honesty was never the problem. The *fear* was. Fear made me say nine things when one would have done it.

Fear is a terrible editor.

He Gave Back Every Coin

There's a servant in one of Jesus' stories who buried the money his master left him. When the master came back and asked for an accounting, the servant handed it over and explained himself:

"So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you" (Matthew 25:25).

He wasn't a thief. He gave back exactly what he'd been given. Every coin. He was honest.

But look at what he says first. *I was afraid*. That's the whole story. Fear ran the whole thing, and the master never disputes a single number.

I read that now and I think: that's me at the kitchen table. Handing over the truth with both hands shaking, and wondering why it didn't go well.

It Wasn't Just My Marriage

Once I saw it, I couldn't stop seeing it.

Remember the woman in the hospital billing office? I *was* right — they eventually took it off — but I explained it to her five separate times, getting a little more wound up each

round, until finally my voice went up and my hands were shaking and I basically demanded it. She fixed it. And I hung up and sat there feeling like the villain, over four hundred dollars, when all I'd needed to say the first time was: *"The doctor wasn't there. I'm not able to pay for a visit that didn't happen."*

And remember the banker. I went in for that loan feeling like a beggar. Head down, apologizing before I'd even sat down. And it turned out when I first applied for the loan, he told me he had pinned my credit report up on his wall — because it was the highest score he'd ever seen come through that branch.

I had walked in there certain he held all the cards. He didn't. He works on the interest. I could hire him or fire him. He worked for *me*. But I never would have guessed it from the way I acted, and I'd bet money he couldn't tell either.

I've done the same thing with publishers, with donors, with people I was trying to bring onto a project. I'd have the true thing to say, and I'd say it, and I'd bury it under so much anxious explanation that nobody could find it.

I've been fearfully authentic in most of those situations.

What Fearless Actually Looks Like

"Fearlessly authentic" can go bad in the other direction, fast.

It doesn't mean blunt. And it isn't the thing I used to do, where I'd swallow something for six months and then finally say it at volume. That was never courage. That was the same fear coming out sideways, and I rarely felt good afterwards.

Fearless authenticity is quieter than that. It's three things:

Say the true thing once. Not five times, and not with a running commentary.

Don't build a case. Reasons are for people who are still deciding. If the decision is already made, reasons are just handles.

Let it sit there. This is the hard one for me. The silence after a true thing is almost unbearable when I'm afraid, and everything in me says to fill it. I've had to learn not to. The other person's reaction belongs to them. It was never mine to manage.

I can't edit fear out of a sentence in the moment — in the moment, the fear is driving. The best place I've managed to get it out is *before* I'm in the room. When I write the line down while I'm calm, it comes out in about twelve words. When I don't, it takes five minutes and costs me the evening.

When I think my honest answer needs propping up, what I'm really saying is that I don't trust it. And when I don't trust it, I pad it until nobody can find it. But honesty doesn't need our help. It'll stand up by itself if we'll let go of it.

If You're In It Right Now

By the end, every sentence I said felt like it was being entered into evidence. I'd learned that if I said the plain thing, it got used against me later. So I managed every word. I called it being careful. Some days I called it being kind. I was worn out, and things blew up anyway.

The exhaustion wasn't coming from the honesty. It was coming from the fear wrapped around the honesty. And the fear wasn't protecting me.

"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment" (1 John 4:18a).

Fear has to do with punishment. That was it exactly. I was talking to her like a man expecting to be punished for what-

ever he was about to say. I couldn't love her well from there. I couldn't even tell her the truth well from there.

So try one thing this week. Just one.

Pick something small you need to say to somebody. Not the big one — not yet. Something ordinary. Sit down beforehand and write out one sentence. One. Then read it over and take out every reason, every apology, and every *"I'm sorry, but."*

Then go say it, and stop talking.

However it goes, you'll at least know you said the thing itself — not a padded version of it, and not a version your fear negotiated down before it ever left the house. That was worth more to me than getting the answer I wanted.

I wish I'd learned it before I lost a marriage. But I'd rather learn it at sixty-one than not at all.

I still have that picture of the four chocolate wrappers on that kitchen table. I look at it differently now. I used to think it was a promise we broke together.

Now I think it was an instruction I hadn't understood yet. The word I kept missing wasn't *authentic*.

It was *fearlessly*.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You don't need us to explain ourselves to You. You already know what we're going to say before we say it, and You love us anyway. Lord, we confess that at times we've been afraid — afraid of people's reactions, afraid of being misunderstood, afraid of what it will cost us to say the true thing. Would You take that fear out of our mouths? Give us the courage to say what's true, one time, kindly, and then to be quiet and trust You with what happens next. Help us to remember that our honesty doesn't need our protection. And

One Slice at a Time

where we've been managing people instead of loving them, forgive us, and set us free from it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Proverbs 29:25. What does it mean that the fear of man is a "snare"? How have you seen that play out in your own conversations?*
- 2. Read Matthew 25:14-30. The servant gave back everything he'd been given. Why do you think the master responded to his fear rather than to his accounting?*
- 3. Think of a recent conversation that went worse than you expected. Were you saying one true thing, or were you stacking up reasons? What might have changed if you'd said less?*
- 4. What's one thing you need to say to someone this week? Try writing it out as a single sentence, then removing every reason and apology. What's left?*

Chapter 19: Compassion, Not Pity

“And of some have compassion, making a difference” (Jude 22, KJV).

I asked Sharon for a script once. How do I hand her over to God? What words do I use?

And then I told her what I was actually carrying, which was not one thing.

I have compassion for her. I care about her. I want her to be the best she can be, and I mean that in the way you mean it about someone you loved.

I’m also really angry.

Both of those were true on the same morning, in the same chest, and I couldn’t work out which one was the real one and which one I was performing.

That’s the state a person can be in when somebody knocks on the door with a casserole.

What Came to the Door

People brought me a great deal that year and it wasn’t all the same substance.

Some of it landed and some of it made me want to leave the room, and sometimes I couldn’t have told you the difference. It wasn’t about how much they cared.

Sharon put language on it.

Sympathy, she said, is a human reaction. It’s the card you send when somebody dies and you don’t know how to say anything. *I’m so sorry for your great loss.* There’s nothing wrong with that. It has its place, and its place is mostly funerals.

Pity is different, and she was blunt about it. In Scripture, when someone pities someone, it usually has a sneer in it — pity for a king because the man was a fool. There's no substance to it. *I pity you. Now God's going to get you.*

Sympathy and pity make a person feel better for a moment. Compassion makes a difference.

Have Compassion, Make a Difference

In the King James, Jude 22 reads: *And of some have compassion, making a difference.*

Eight words, sitting in one of the shortest books in the Bible, in the middle of a passage about how to handle people who are in trouble.

Compassion and difference, welded together in the same breath. Not compassion and feeling. Not compassion and understanding. Compassion, making a difference — as though the second thing is how you'd know the first thing had happened.

The Day Her Husband Died

A mutual friend of Sharon's and mine lost her husband. He died at home, and Sharon was there that day.

He was still lying on the couch. People were arriving, filling the room, doing what people do — bringing their sympathy and their pity into a house where a woman had just lost her husband.

Sharon walked over, put her mouth next to the woman's ear, and asked her two questions.

What can I do for you? What do you need right now?

The woman didn't look at anybody else in the room. She acknowledged that they were there, and then she answered the question.

I need a mama hug.

Sharon has been called mama by half the people who know her, and that was what the woman needed at that hour of that day, and she got it.

Nobody in that room could bring her husband back. Everyone knew that. The difference between the person who helped and the people who filled the doorway was one question, asked quietly, that the woman was allowed to answer.

What Compassion Says

Sharon gave me the words, and they're not complicated.

Compassion doesn't say *I feel really bad for you*. It says: *What's your immediate need? What can I do today that would help?*

I can't take away your pain. I can't take away your grief. But there's something I can do for you right now.

That's an offer a person in grief can actually accept. It doesn't require them to explain anything, or perform gratitude, or produce a feeling on demand.

She also said what to do when you're standing in front of someone and you have nothing. Dig down, and say: *Lord, give me Your compassion*. Because sympathy is a human feeling and compassion comes from the Spirit of God in us, which means it can be asked for.

And she said the answer is often a hug. Also for the men. Grown men, big men, coming to her for the same thing that woman asked for.

Moved With Compassion

The Gospels use that phrase over and over, and it's always followed by an action.

Jesus was moved with compassion, and the leper was clean. Moved with compassion, and the blind man saw. Moved with compassion for a crowd that had been with Him three days, and He fed them before He sent them home.

Sharon's version: when Jesus was moved with compassion, the demons ran, the lame walked, the blind saw, the deaf heard.

Every single time, something changed. The word never once appears in the Gospels followed by nothing.

At the tomb of Lazarus, He wept — knowing exactly what He was about to do, four days late on purpose, with the outcome already settled. Sharon called those the right kind of tears. He had so much love in Him He couldn't hold them back.

That's worth noticing if you're the one helping. He cried at a funeral where He was about to raise the man. The feeling wasn't a substitute for the action and the action didn't cancel the feeling.

And for Yourself

Sharon said, *You've got to have compassion, and give yourself a break, too.*

Compassion, aimed inward, works the same way as compassion aimed at anybody else. It isn't *poor me* — that's the pity version, and it corrodes. It's the same two questions, turned around.

What do I actually need right now? What's one thing I could do today that would help?

I can't take away my own grief either. But there's usually something I can do before lunch.

What You Might Do

When it's your turn, ask the question instead of only offering the feeling.

What do you need right now? Then be quiet and let them answer, even if the answer is odd, even if the answer is a hug or a load of laundry or somebody to sit in the car with them outside the courthouse.

And say the honest part out loud: you can't take away the pain. Saying so is what makes the rest of it believable.

If you have nothing to give, ask God for His compassion. That's a real prayer with a real answer, and it's available in the doorway on the way in.

One person asked her what she needed.

It's often a hug.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that Your Son was moved with compassion, and that something happened every single time. Thank You that He wept at a grave where He already knew the ending. Lord, for those of us in a season where people keep arriving with words that don't land — give us grace for them, because they're trying. And when it's our turn to stand in somebody else's doorway, keep us from offering pity. Give us Your compassion instead, since we don't manufacture it ourselves. Teach us to ask what's needed today and to be quiet long enough to hear the answer. And help us to turn some of that on ourselves, and give ourselves a break, too. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Jude 22, then look up two or three places in the Gospels where Jesus is described as moved with compassion, such as Matthew 14:14, Matthew 15:32–38, and Mark 1:40–42. What happens next in each one?*
- 2. Read John 11:32–44. Why do you think He wept, given what He was about to do? What does that say about feeling and action belonging together?*
- 3. Think of the people who have helped you most this year. What did they actually do or say? How was it different from what the others offered?*
- 4. Ask yourself Sharon's two questions right now. What do you need today, and what's one thing you could do about it before the day is out?*

Chapter 20: Get Back on the Horse

*“For though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again”
(Proverbs 24:16).*

I have a grass tennis court in my backyard. I put it in years ago because my kids and I love the game and because grass is what they play on at Wimbledon, and a man is allowed one ridiculous thing.

Mostly I play with my people who send the ball back to me in a friendly way.

That Friday night I was playing with a friend from church who plays a great deal of tennis and plays it aggressively. He was putting the ball everywhere, and I was chasing it.

I went for one I had no business going for.

I knew halfway there that I was going down. I was stretched way too far and there was nothing to do about it, and it happened slowly, the way those things do. Face. Elbow. Hip. Knee. The whole side of me arriving in sequence.

It felt like eight hundred pounds hitting the ground.

What I Normally Do

I hate pain. Enough that I have a whole procedure for it.

I lie there. I don't move a muscle until I've taken a full inventory — is anything broken, is my neck all right, what happens if I try to sit up. I've done this my entire life. Assess first, then move.

So I hit the grass and my body started to settle into the usual routine.

And what came instead was: *Eric, get up. Eric, get up. Get up right now.*

That is not my normal response. It wasn't a thought I had. It arrived.

So I got up. I stood straight up off the ground and walked back toward the line to hit another ball, and they were calling over asking whether I was sure I was all right.

I said yes. And I was. I had bruises up the whole side of me for a week, and nothing else.

What Would Have Happened

The tennis doesn't matter. What matters is what my usual procedure actually produces, which I could see clearly for the first time from a standing position.

If I'd stayed down there taking inventory, fear would have set in. And it works fast.

Then would come the sentence, and I know exactly what it is because I've said it before: *I'm too old for this.*

And maybe I am. But once that sentence gets said out loud, it isn't a piece of data anymore. It's a decision. I'd have stopped playing on that court, and I'd have had a reason ready for anyone who asked, and the reason would have sounded sensible.

That's how a man loses a thing he loves. Not in the fall. In the twenty minutes after it, lying on the grass being reasonable.

Sharon's Horse

I told her about it, and she gave me the old saying, which she uses on herself because she used to ride.

You fall off the horse, you get right back up, or you'll never get up again.

Then she told me about the first time she had to do it. She said what she was thinking was, *I don't want to get up there again.*

And what she heard back was: you'd better do it now.

Then the reason.

If you don't get back up now, all you'll think about is the pain. You won't think about the pleasure that riding the horse gave you.

The Pleasure Clause

I'd always heard *get back on the horse* as advice about courage. Be brave, don't let fear win, and so on. It sounded like something a coach says.

She isn't talking about courage. She's talking about what happens to your memory.

Stay down long enough and the fall becomes the whole file. The pain is recent, vivid, and physical, and it starts writing over everything else. Within a week, *horse* means the day you came off one. Within a year you've forgotten that there was a reason you got on in the first place — that it was one of the better things in your life, that you did it because it made you happy.

The pain doesn't just make you afraid of the next ride. It reaches backward and takes the last twenty years of riding with it.

Which is the real possibility for anybody in the first year after something like this. Not that you'll be hurt. You've already been hurt. It's that the hurt will spread backward through your history until you can't remember why you ever wanted any of it.

I've watched people do that with marriage itself. The last two years rewrite the previous twenty, and they end up saying it was all a waste, which isn't true and which they may never have said before.

Getting up quickly is how you protect the good part.

What She Was Actually Talking About

We weren't talking about tennis when she said it. I had just told her about sending a note out to thousands of subscribers and then second-guessing it for forty-eight hours afterward, the way I do every time.

What she said first was that when you minister out of your own pain, the healing comes to you first. You're ministering the way you normally would. You're not putting up a facade.

Then came the horse.

The horse was the ministry. Not another marriage — she never once suggested I hurry back into a relationship, and she'd have stopped me if I'd tried. The horse was the writing, the podcast, the standing up in front of people. Thirty years of it, and I had decided it was finished.

She wanted me to take the time I needed to heal from the marriage, and she wanted that time to be shorter than I'd have chosen. Left to myself I'd have stayed down for years, running the inventory, the way I'd have stayed down on that tennis court.

There was too much still to do.

Seven Times

Proverbs says the righteous fall seven times and rise again.

Not once. Seven — which in that literature means as often as it takes. The falling isn't the exception in that sentence.

It's assumed. The verse doesn't distinguish the righteous man by whether he goes down; it distinguishes him by what he does next, over and over, at a frequency nobody would call impressive.

Micah puts it in the first person, and it's practically a taunt: *Do not gloat over me, my enemy. Though I have fallen, I will rise.*

Present tense. Fallen already, still on the ground, saying it out loud before it's happened.

That's not a man who has recovered. It's a man announcing his intention from the dirt.

What You Might Do

Pick up the thing you set down.

Not everything. One thing — the one that's been sitting there since it happened, the project or the habit or the invitation you've been putting off. Mine was a stack of beautiful printed materials for a film I'd stopped raising money for, sitting on a shelf where I could see them every day.

Do the smallest real version of it this week. Send one email. Make one call. Put it back in motion at whatever size you can manage.

And when you go down again — you will, that's the seven — notice how long you spend on the ground taking inventory. Try cutting it in half. You'll find the assessment is mostly the same either way.

You can take the assessment later.

Take it standing.

Will you pray with me?

One Slice at a Time

Father, thank You that You are not surprised by a fall. Thank You that Your Word counts them and keeps going. Lord, for those of us lying still and taking inventory — would You get us up? Not to prove anything, and not because we're strong, but before the pain writes over everything good that came before it. Protect our memories of what we loved. Where fear has already started talking sense to us, give us one small thing to do this week and the will to do it. And when we go down again, help us to get up quicker each time. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Proverbs 24:16 and Micah 7:8. What distinguishes the righteous person in these verses? What is assumed about them?*
- 2. What did you set down after everything happened that you haven't picked back up? Why that one?*
- 3. Sharon said if you don't get back up, all you'll think about is the pain and not the pleasure. Where has recent pain started rewriting good memories from before it?*
- 4. What's the smallest real version of getting back on — something you could actually do this week? Name it and put a day next to it.*

Chapter 21: It Would Be Unhealthy Not To

“Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate” (2 Samuel 12:20).

I had a plan and I couldn’t make myself start it.

Get through the retreat weekend. Get through the Fourth of July. Then, on the seventh or the eighth, begin again. Announce what I was doing, walk people through one of my books, read a chapter a day online. Get back into public ministry.

I laid it out for Sharon and then asked the question I’d been circling for weeks. Do you think that’s healthy? Is it too soon?

She said, “I would say it’d be unhealthy not to.”

I made her say it again. I wrote it down. It’s in my notes with a box drawn around it.

She Turned the Question Over

I had been asking whether going back was safe. Whether I’d recovered enough, whether I’d embarrass myself, whether people would think it was fast.

Every version of my question assumed the same thing: that waiting is the neutral option. That standing still costs nothing, and moving is the risk.

She priced the other side.

She was right. I told her in the same conversation that I thought I was approaching the unhealthy side of it right then. People I hadn’t told were writing to ask if I was all

right — *Haven't heard from you in a while, are you okay?* My silence had gotten loud enough that people were checking on me.

There's a point where resting becomes hiding. It doesn't announce itself. The days are identical.

What Was Actually Stopping Me

It wasn't uncertainty about the right timing.

I was afraid of what would be said about anything I put out. I could picture something going up and something else coming back at it, and me having to decide what to do about that in public.

Sharon's answer to that was short. *You can do whatever you want.*

Meaning: you can hide a comment. You can not read it. You can turn the thing off. The fear was built on a scenario where I had no options, and I had all the ordinary options anybody has.

Waking Up Knowing

The other thing holding me still was that I was waiting for a feeling.

I'd been waiting to wake up one morning *knowing*. Not wondering. Knowing. Ready in a way I could feel in my chest, so that starting would be a response to something rather than a decision I'd have to make and defend.

I said as much to her. I'd been waiting for that, and it wasn't happening.

It may or may not happen. It hadn't for me in eight months, and the waiting itself had become the condition I was waiting to get out of.

At some point you just move forward. That's the whole of the guidance available.

Three Days

Sharon knows this one from the inside, so I took close note to what she said.

Chuck died on a Thursday. His memorial service was planned for the following Wednesday. What should she do about going to church on the Sunday in between?

She found herself asking whether it was too soon to go. She told me she couldn't understand what was wrong with her — *questioning going to church, for heaven's sake.*

Then the Holy Spirit rose up in her with two things.

What have you told others?

And: If you don't do it now, you may never do it again.

Three days. That's not a recommendation and I'm not putting it forward as a schedule for anybody. What matters is the mechanism she'd spotted. The gap between what she'd have told any grieving person in her church and what she was telling herself — and the recognition that a delay begun for good reasons can quietly become permanent.

The Announcement I Didn't Make

There was a second question underneath all of it, and it's the one I expected to take the longest.

I'd told thousands of email subscribers that I'd gotten married. I'd told them how I believed God had put it together. Those people were, in some sense, owed something.

So did I need to make a statement? Address it publicly, once, properly, and then move on?

Sharon's answer was no, and she was quick about it.

Make a list of names, she said. Prioritize it. If there are ten you're genuinely not at rest about — people you can't move forward without telling — then tell those ten. The rest you don't have to.

I don't? I feel like I need to do a public post.

"I really wouldn't."

Then she gave me the alternative, which is better than a statement and costs nothing. Along the way, it'll just happen. A question will come through. Then another. And when you see a little stream of them, you'll know it's time.

Let it be answered rather than announced.

The thing I'd been dreading was a moment I was going to have to construct. What she described was a moment that would arrive on its own, in a size I could handle, brought to me by people who actually wanted to know.

I never did make the statement. It came up on its own, the way she said it would — a relationship that didn't work out, mentioned in passing. Nobody has ever complained to me about the absence of an announcement. And this book, two years on, is the fuller answer, given at a time of my choosing.

David Got Up

The child born to David and Bathsheba became ill, and David fasted and lay on the ground all night. His servants couldn't get him up or get him to eat.

Then the child died, and they were afraid to tell him — if he was like this while the child lived, what would he do now?

He saw them whispering, worked it out, and asked. They told him.

And David got up off the ground. Washed. Put on lotions. Changed his clothes. Went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then went home and asked for food, and ate it.

His servants were baffled and said so, because it was exactly backward from what everyone expected.

His answer was straightforward. While the child was alive he fasted and wept, because who knows, the LORD might be gracious. But now he's dead — can I bring him back? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.

Nobody in that account tells David he's grieving wrong. Nobody suggests he didn't love the child. He simply knew which season he was in, and when it changed, he washed and got dressed.

There's a version of grief that requires a person to stay on the floor to prove the loss was real. David didn't hold with it. He wept while weeping was the thing, and then he ate.

What You Might Do

Take the thing you've been planning to restart and pick the date. Not the conditions — the date. Put it on a calendar where you can see it.

Then make the list Sharon described. The handful of people you're not at rest about, who need to hear it from you directly. Not the whole roll. Not a post.

And check the price on the other side of the ledger. Ask what another three months of waiting will cost you, in the same detail you've been using to imagine what starting might cost. That's the column I'd left blank.

There may never have been a morning when I woke up knowing.

There was only the next Sunday.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You don't ask us to stay on the floor to prove that something mattered. Thank You that David got up, washed his face, and worshiped, and that You did not think less of him for it. Lord, for those of us waiting to feel ready — would You show us that the feeling may not come, and that the waiting has its own cost? Give us a date. Give us the few names we need to tell, and free us from telling everybody. And where fear is building a case about what people will say, remind us of how many ordinary options we still have. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read 2 Samuel 12:15-23. What surprises the servants, and how does David explain himself? What does he know that they don't?*
- 2. If you've been waiting to feel something before you start again, what is it? And how long have you been waiting for it?*
- 3. Make the list. Who are the few people you genuinely can't move forward without telling? Is it as long as you assumed?*
- 4. What will another three months of waiting cost you? Write that column out in the same detail you've used to imagine what starting might cost.*

Chapter 22: Don't Catch the First Wave

"As soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the poplar trees, move quickly" (2 Samuel 5:24).

I was driving one afternoon, working through my next steps.

Her family. Her parents. Her kids. The friends of hers I'd met and liked and had my own relationships with. I'd been part of those people's lives, briefly, and then I'd disappeared from them, and I didn't know what I owed anybody.

So I was drafting. Who to call first, what to say, whether to write instead, in what order.

Then a second thought arrived behind the first one, and it was more useful: it might all just be too soon. I might not need to do anything. I might never need to do anything.

I brought both halves to Sharon, because I couldn't tell which was wisdom and which was avoidance.

Time and Timing

She gave me a distinction.

"Time means nothing to God. But timing is everything."

To Him a day is as a thousand years. The clock isn't the point. When He deals with us, He deals with us at particular moments, and the moment matters.

My first reaction was to take the freeing half and run with it. I said that was a relief — if time means nothing, then I could check out for a long while.

And then I heard myself, and corrected it in the same breath. Time means nothing. *Timing* means I need to be prepared and ready when the opportunity comes, or when He says do something.

Those are not the same posture at all. One is a man who has stopped watching. The other is a man watching closely for something specific.

The Surfers

Sharon learned it long before she knew the Lord, sitting on a beach in California. Two of her cousins were surfers. She never went out on the water — she'd sit and watch them.

And she'd see these beautiful waves rolling in, and her cousins wouldn't move. Wave after wave, and the two of them just sitting out there.

What are you waiting for? Look at those gorgeous waves!

They told her she didn't get it yet.

Finally she got frustrated enough to demand an explanation.

Don't catch the first wave. Wait. Sometimes it's not until the seventh, but at least the second or the third.

Once you see a wave come in and draw back from an undercurrent, then you know. The next one is higher, more stable, better to ride.

"Surfing is all about timing," they kept telling her.

And the warning underneath it: if you go out on that first one, you're going to fall on your face. You've got to know what that wave looks like.

The Wave That Went By Is the Information

That's what makes this different from ordinary advice about patience.

Her cousins weren't waiting for a feeling, or for enough time to pass, or for the ocean to seem safer. They were read-

ing the water. And the specific thing they were reading was the wave they had just let go.

The one that comes in and pulls back tells you what's behind it. Miss that, and you're not waiting wisely — you're just sitting there.

Which reframed my afternoon of drafting. The urge I had to start calling her family and friends wasn't wrong. It was first. And a first wave is not a bad wave. It's an unread one.

The undercurrent in my case was the last attempt I'd made to fix something before I was ready. I knew exactly what that had produced. That was my information, sitting right there, if I'd bothered to read it instead of trying to get past it.

Which Is Not the Same as Sitting on the Beach

I want to put this next to the previous chapter, because they'll look like they disagree.

There I said the waiting has a cost, and that at some point you just have to move. Here I'm saying don't take the first wave. Both are true and they're about different things.

Getting back to your own work — your job, your calling, the thing you set down — is the previous chapter. Don't wait to feel ready for that. Pick a date.

Initiating something with other people, especially the ones tangled up in what happened, is this chapter. That's where the first wave will get you.

And the position is the same in both. Sharon's cousins were not on the beach. They were out in the water, on their boards, facing the right direction, already wet. Everything about them was ready except the moment.

That's the posture. Not resting. Not deciding. Watching.

The Sound in the Trees

David beat the Philistines at Baal Perazim. He asked God first, God said go, and he went, and it worked.

Then the Philistines came back and spread out in the same valley.

Same enemy. Same ground. And David asks again — which is the first remarkable thing, because he had a proven method from three verses earlier.

God tells him something different this time. Do not go straight up. Circle around behind them and attack in front of the poplar trees.

And then: As soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the poplar trees, move quickly, because that will mean the LORD has gone out in front of you.

There was a sound to wait for. Not a length of time. A signal, and it came from the trees, from something outside himself, which meant David had to be still enough to hear leaves move while an army stood in front of him.

I notice too that the instruction wasn't *wait*. It was *wait, and then move quickly*. The waiting was entirely in service of the speed.

What You Might Do

If there's a call you're planning to make to somebody on the other side of all this, put a date on it three months out and see whether you still want to make it.

Many first waves don't survive that. The ones that do are usually worth riding.

Meanwhile, read the last wave. Whatever you already tried too early — write down what it produced. That's not a re-

gret to get past. It's the undercurrent, and it's telling you what's coming behind it.

And stay in the water. Keep the board under you. Don't confuse waiting for the right moment with having stopped looking for one. The first is a discipline. The second is a slow retirement.

I'm not sitting on the beach.

I'm out there watching the one that just went by.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You are never in a hurry and never late. Thank You that time means nothing to You, and that timing means everything when You deal with us. Lord, for those of us with our hands on something we want to fix right now — would You steady us? Teach us to read what has already happened instead of rushing past it. Keep us in the water and facing the right way, ready to move fast when You say move. And give us ears for the sound in the trees, even with everything else in front of us making noise. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. Read 2 Samuel 5:17-25. Why do you think David asked a second time when he already had a working answer? What was he told to wait for?
2. What's the first wave in front of you right now — the call, the letter, the conversation you want to initiate? What happens if you date it three months out?
3. What did you already try too early? What did it produce, and what does that tell you about what's coming next?
4. Are you in the water or on the beach? What would it look like this week to be ready without moving yet?

Chapter 23: At the Same Time

*“And He sent a man before them — Joseph, sold as a slave”
(Psalm 105:17).*

A man I hadn’t spoken to in years called me out of nowhere.

He said I’d been on his mind. Not that week — for about two months. He didn’t know why. He’d just kept thinking about me and finally decided to stop wondering and pick up the phone.

Two months.

I counted backward. Two months back put him well before the worst of it, and before anybody knew anything, and before I had any idea I would need a single person to call me.

He’d been carrying me around for eight weeks without knowing what for.

That happened more than once that year. People surfacing from decades ago. People who had no way of knowing. One of them had already heard something and called anyway, which is its own kind of courage.

At the time, I wondered if it was God, or coincidence, or in the general category of nice things happening in a bad season.

A Change in Direction

Sharon reminded me about Joseph.

Joseph is in the pit.

His brothers have thrown him in and they’re standing above him working out how to kill him. He can hear them planning it. He isn’t guessing at their intentions. He’s listening to the discussion.

From down there, the situation admits of no interpretation.
I'm gone. What can I do?

Then she moved the camera.

At the same time, at a completely different end of the desert, a caravan is moving. Traders with wealth loaded onto their camels, traveling to Egypt.

There's no sign out there in the desert saying *Joseph is over this way*.

Nothing about their route has anything to do with him. They're going about their business, on a day that has nothing to do with a boy in a hole.

And God brings them together.

The caravan comes over the horizon at precisely the moment those brothers are one decision away from murder. The brothers look up and see it coming, and what they see is money.

Let's not kill him. Let's sell him.

The Vehicle Is the Same

The caravan wasn't a rescue.

Joseph didn't get pulled out and sent home. He got sold. He went into slavery, into Potiphar's house, into an accusation and a prison, and years went by.

The caravan was the worst thing that happened to him and it was also the answer.

And where were those traders headed? Toward Egypt. Toward the country where a king would one day need a dream interpreted and there would be exactly one man in the kingdom who could do it.

Sharon put the question clearly: how was he going to get there?

He was seventeen years old in the middle of nowhere with no money and no standing. There was no route from that pit to that throne room that any reasonable person could have drawn. And the only conveyance available was the one that arrived disguised as the end of his life.

What She Was Actually Telling Me

She wasn't giving me a Bible study. She was making a claim about my life, and she made it directly.

At the same time that I was being crushed by the news I got, God was preparing a people who would stand with me. Who would support me.

And while I was sitting there asking *so what's next, what am I going to do, where do I go from here*, He was preparing something that hadn't been revealed to me yet.

That's not a promise that things will work out. It's a claim about timing. That the preparation had already started, in a place I couldn't see, before I knew I'd need it.

Which is, as it happens, a testable claim. And the phone call I opened this chapter with is my evidence, because that man started thinking about me two months before there was anything to think about.

Who Showed Up

This is my list of the people who turned up, and you may have your own.

The two friends who told me to make the best decision for myself and not to worry what anybody else said.

The man who called to say he'd write a letter defending my integrity, before I'd asked anybody for anything.

The friend who called and said he didn't need any details and just wanted to know if I was okay.

The couples I'd counseled years ago who wouldn't accept my apology and told me instead that the standard I'd held had given them hope.

The men who came to my house for a weekend and told me that my being open over the years was why they were able to be open now.

Not one of those people questioned me. Not one asked for the account before deciding whether to stay.

I did not assemble that group. I couldn't have. Most of those relationships were built years ago for entirely different reasons, by a man who had no idea what he was building them for.

He Sent a Man

Psalm 105 tells the story in a single line.

And He sent a man before them — Joseph, sold as a slave.

God is the subject of that sentence. Not the brothers. The psalmist looks at a kidnapping and a human trafficking transaction and says: He sent a man.

Then: They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons, till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the LORD proved him true.

Till. The shackles have an end date in that sentence, and the end date is not an escape — it's the word being proved true.

Joseph didn't know any of that in the pit. He couldn't have. There's no version of that afternoon where he had access to the sentence in Psalm 105.

He just had brothers overhead and dust in his mouth and, somewhere out past the horizon, camels making an unexpected appearance.

What You Might Do

Write the list. Everybody who has shown up, going back to the beginning of this.

Then, next to each name, write when you met them. Not when they helped — when the relationship started. Most of mine started years before, for reasons that had nothing to do with any of this.

The exercise converts a general belief that God is at work into something you can look at on paper.

And when you catch yourself asking what's next, you can let the question sit unanswered. Not because an answer is coming on any schedule you'd recognize. Because the preparation and the crisis run at the same time, and only one of them is visible from where you're standing.

The man who called had been carrying me for two months before I knew I needed carrying.

The caravan was already on its way.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You work in places we cannot see, on timelines we did not set. Thank You that while Joseph was listening to his brothers plan his death, You were bringing a caravan in a desert with no signposts in it. Lord, for those of us in the pit right now — we're not asking to be shown the whole thing. Just give us the grace to believe that something

is already in motion. Thank You for the people You sent us who didn't need for the full account before they stayed. Help us to recognize them, and to say so to them. And where the thing that arrives looks like the end of us, give us the humility to wonder whether it's the way through. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Genesis 37:18-28, then Psalm 105:16-22. Who does the psalm say sent Joseph to Egypt? What does that do to the story you just read?*
- 2. Sharon pointed out there was no sign in the desert saying Joseph was over that way. Where in your own situation did something arrive that had no ordinary reason to?*
- 3. Make the list of people who showed up. Beside each name, write when the relationship actually began. What do you notice?*
- 4. Is there something you'd call the worst thing that happened, which may also turn out to be the way through? What would it cost you to hold that possibility open without forcing it?*

Chapter 24: “You Don’t Get Burned Out on Ministry”

“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

I bought a sensor for my type 2 diabetes and then left it sitting there.

I’d used one before. Two weeks on a free one, and it worked — it was genuinely helpful. It was also relentless. You wear it on your arm and it tells you what everything you eat is doing to you, in real time, which is the point of it.

Then I ran out, went to Texas, and got all out of whack again. So I paid for another one.

And I didn’t want to put it on.

The reason wasn’t the needle or the cost. It’s that the moment it goes on my arm, I’m analyzing again. Everything I eat, everything I do, all day. I’d be stuck in it.

It felt exactly like not wanting to go back to Celebrate Recovery. Same flavor. I don’t want to give up — I want to do what’s right — and I am so tired.

If you’d asked me to name that, I’d have said burnout.

What She Said

Sharon has heard the word a great deal, from staff, from ministry people, from her dancers. And her answer is the same.

“You don’t get burned out on ministry. You get burned out on life.”

Then she gave me her own evidence, which is the part that makes it credible rather than tidy.

She had a women's luncheon coming up that Saturday. She said she can get up there tired. She can get up on the pulpit with a headache, and the moment she's up there, it's gone. All of it.

And then she comes down off the platform and it's *don't you dare come back*.

That's not a person claiming ministry doesn't cost anything. It's a person who has noticed that the cost arrives from somewhere other than where she'd assumed.

It isn't the ministry that burns us out. It's the issues of life. The cares of the day. What she called the enemy coming along to chew on the edges and wear you down.

Why the Distinction Matters

Because the two diagnoses lead in opposite directions.

If ministry is what's draining you, the cure is less ministry. Step back, step down, hand it off, and get some distance from the thing that's hurting you. That's the reasonable move.

If life is what's draining you and the ministry is the one hour a week when the headache lifts, then stepping back removes the wrong thing. You'd be cutting the only part of the week that was giving something back.

I could test that against my own year without much difficulty. The hours that took the most out of me were the paperwork, the phone calls, the wondering what people had heard. The hours that gave something back were the ones where I was actually doing what I've been doing for thirty years.

I'd been ready to reduce the second column to make room for the first.

The Heavier Half

Sharon had first worked this out with her dancers.

They'd come to her feeling done. Finished, empty, nothing left, ready to stop.

She told them no. What's happening, she said, is that God is taking you up another step. You've gone as far as you can go on the level you're on, and He's moving you, and *the glory of God is heavy*.

You're feeling the weight of a new calling. And you look at that weight and read it as something going wrong — something's broken, I need to back away, I'm burned out.

So she had the dancers go up one step at a time and push their way through the feeling.

This is not about you stepping out, she told me. This is about you recognizing the weight of glory that's on you. It's already there. You haven't stepped into it yet, because you're going through all of this.

The Bible Calls It Weight

That isn't a metaphor Sharon invented. The Hebrew word for glory, *kavod*, carries the sense of heaviness — weight, substance, the opposite of something light or empty.

And Paul does the same thing in Greek. He says our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us *an eternal weight of glory* — that's the older rendering, and it's more literal than the modern ones. Glory has mass in that sentence, and it's set on a scale opposite our troubles, outweighing them.

Which means heaviness by itself tells you almost nothing. Grief is heavy. Shame is heavy. Glory is heavy. All three sit on you in the chest and make the stairs harder, and you cannot identify which one you're carrying by weight alone.

I felt a weight I hadn't felt before, assumed it was decline, and started planning accordingly.

Paul says it right there in the same passage: *we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.* Both at once. The wasting is real but it isn't the whole sentence.

Glory to Glory

The verse Sharon kept coming back to is the one about being transformed from glory to glory, and she'd add: and on up, until He comes.

There's no arrival in that sentence. No level at which you've finished and can rest on the plateau. Just another step, and then another.

Which is either exhausting or freeing depending on what you do with it. What it did for me was explain the pattern of hitting what feels like a brick wall and concluding the whole thing has gone bad — when, as she put it, if you're serving with the right heart, that's the next stage, and you've simply never been there before.

The unfamiliarity is the evidence, not the problem.

What You Might Do

Take the last two weeks and split them into two columns.

What actually drained you — hour by hour, honestly. Then what gave something back, even a little.

When you do it, see if the columns are where you expected.

Then, before you step back from anything, ask which column you're cutting.

And if you're carrying a weight you've never carried before, hold the question open a while before you name it. It may be grief, and grief needs rest. It may also be the next step, and that one needs stairs.

Some of that weight was glory.

I'd been reading all of it as decline.

I put the sensor on my arm.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that the work You've given us is not what's wearing us out. Thank You that You call Your own glory heavy, and that You don't ask us to carry it as though it were nothing. Lord, for those of us who are tired enough to quit — would You show us what's actually draining us? Keep us from cutting away the one thing that gives something back. And where the weight we're feeling is a new step and not a decline, give us the strength to go up it one stair at a time. Thank You that we go from glory to glory, and that You are not finished with us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 and 3:18. What does Paul say is happening outwardly and inwardly at the same time? What does it mean that glory is described as having weight?*
- 2. Do the two columns for the last two weeks. What actually drained you, and what gave something back? Did the columns land where you expected?*
- 3. What have you been considering stepping back from? Which column is it in?*

4. Where are you feeling a weight you haven't felt before? What would change if it turned out to be a new step rather than the end of something?

Chapter 25: Write the Vision — and Put Yourself In It

“Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it” (Habakkuk 2:2).

That Saturday was supposed to be our celebration.

The one in her state, with her people, before she moved. It had been on the calendar for months. The following week she was going to move here, and then there’d be the second party in September, with my people.

None of it happened, and the Saturday came anyway.

What I did instead was drive to North Carolina.

A friend has a house up in the Blue Ridge Mountains and had told me to come whenever I wanted. So I put the top down on my new car and drove through the mountains. I built a circuit out of it — a friend on the way down, another on the way back through Atlanta, and a stop at the place where a friend is writing the script for a film I’ve been working on. Seven or eight days.

And I woke up every single morning of the week before it wanting to cancel.

Not just once. Pretty much every day. *It’s a long drive. It’ll wear me out. All that conversing, all that rehashing. Have I bitten off too much? Maybe I’ll just cancel the whole thing.*

I went anyway.

What She’d Been Pushing Me Toward

Some weeks before that, Sharon had started in on goals.

Not encouragement. She’d done that part already, and she said so: *you needed a cheerleader at the beginning, and I was*

your cheerleader. But there comes a point where the question changes from *how are you holding up* to *where do you go from here*, and cheerleading has nothing to offer the second question.

What she wanted was specific and relentless. What are my goals for today. For this week. Break it into monthly, then a year. Where do you want to be five years from now? Where will you be next week that's better than where you are this week?

And then: write them down.

She took it straight to Habakkuk. Write the vision on tablets. Write it plain, make it clear, so that those who read it can readily grasp it.

Her emphasis was on that last clause, and on the fact that the person doing the reading is often you. It's your vision. You'll be reading it to find out where you are on it.

Chuck's Program

Chuck taught goal-setting at their Bible college, and before that he'd taught it in his real estate office — how to set targets, how to approach people, how to build a week.

For him it stopped being a business technique and became a way of living.

People would tell him they didn't have time. *I don't have time for this, I don't have time for that.* So he'd sit them down and make them do hourly goals.

Hourly. What did you do between nine and ten. Between ten and eleven.

If food was the problem, he'd have them write down everything that went in their mouth. Not to shame anybody — to make it visible. Because when it's in your head it's a vague

sense of being busy or being careful, and when it's on paper it's an hour you can point to where nothing happened.

He made them see it. And what they'd find was that there *was* time. There was time for God in there. There was time for them in there.

Sharon's summary of it: it's more than a calendar of events. It's a calendar of what you want, and what it's going to take to get there, and how you're going to get what it takes.

The Question He'd Ask

Then Chuck would read what a person had written, and he'd say the thing this chapter is named for.

I don't see anything in here for you individually.

The goals would be good. Wonderful goals. Work, family, church, service, all of it laid out properly.

And nothing in the whole document for the one who wrote it.

So the goals are good. But what about you?

The North Carolina trip was the first item I put on a calendar for no reason other than that I wanted to do it. That's why it belongs in this chapter and not in the one about rest. It wasn't recovery. It was a line in the plan with my own name on it.

Habakkuk Wasn't Getting a Pep Talk

Sharon pointed out something about that book, Habakkuk.

Read chapter one before you read chapter two. The prophet is not in good shape. He's complaining — *how long, LORD, must I call for help and You not listen?* There's violence and injustice all around him and God appears to be doing nothing about it.

God's answer, when it comes, is not comfort. He doesn't say *I know how you feel*. He doesn't offer to be a cheerleader.

He says: write it down. Make it plain. Put it where a runner can read it on the move.

Then: *For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.*

That's a strange thing to give a man in distress, and it's exactly right. He isn't told the trouble is over. He's told to write down where this is going, in large enough letters that someone can read it on the move, and then to hold on for a delay that will feel like failure and isn't.

A vision written down is something to hold on to when nothing has changed yet.

That weekend had been claimed months earlier. A celebration was already written on it.

What I did instead was drive a long way through the mountains with the top down, and sit with friends who were glad to see me.

It was a celebration of a different color.

What You Might Do

Write it plain. Where do you want to be next week, this month, a year from now. In sentences. On paper.

Then read it back and look for yourself in it. If everything on the page is for other people — the work, the kids, the ministry, the obligations — you've written a good document with a hole in it. Add one thing that's only for you and give it a date.

Then go, on the morning when you want to cancel. That morning will come, and it may come every day for a week.

The wanting to cancel isn't information about whether it's a good idea.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You didn't answer Habakkuk with a pep talk. Thank You that You told him to write it down and make it plain, and that You meant it kindly. Lord, for those of us with no idea where we're going — would You give us something specific enough to put on paper? Show us the delay for what it is, and keep us from reading it as a refusal. And when we lay out our plans and there's nothing in them for us, give us the courage to add a line with our own name on it. Then help us to go, on the morning we most want to cancel. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Habakkuk 1:1-4, then 2:1-4. What is the prophet complaining about, and what does God tell him to do about it? Why write it down rather than explain it?*
- 2. Write your goals for this week, this month, and this year. Plainly, in sentences. What is on the page?*
- 3. Read what you wrote and look for yourself in it. Is there anything on that page that's only for you?*
- 4. What's the trip, the project, or the day you keep almost canceling? Put a date on it, and tell one person you're going.*

Chapter 26: Scratch Through the Black

“Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter” (Ruth 1:20).

There was a great deal that was good.

That’s an awkward thing to say about a marriage that ended, and it’s true. There were wonderful feelings in it. There were days I would not trade. Somebody asks how it was, and the honest answer is that when it was good it was really good, and when it wasn’t it wasn’t, and the two ran alongside each other the whole time.

What I told Sharon was that I hated to throw all that away in my mind.

Because that’s what was happening. Not deliberately. The hard stretches had come to outweigh the good ones in the remembering, spreading over the whole of it, and I could feel the good parts getting harder to reach. Not disproven. Just covered.

The Crayons

Sharon does an exercise with people who join her dance team, and she offered it to me as something to do with a piece of paper.

Take a sheet of art paper, or just plain copy paper, and a box of crayons.

Start with the lightest color in the box. Not white, but the lightest one you can actually see. Scribble with it, a patch three or four inches across.

Then the next color. Scribble over the top of it. Then the next, and the next. Yellow, then pink, then green, then blue. Build the bright colors up in layers until you’ve worked through the whole box.

Then take the black and cover all of it. Heavily. Go over it and over it until you cannot see a single one of the other colors. The whole patch is black.

Then she hands them a penny, or a paper clip, or a dime.

Scratch a line through it.

And every color underneath comes up.

What They See

The dancers do it, and then they look at what's on the paper, and Sharon says: black was on top. *That's all I see is black.*

No. There's more to it.

She learned it from Chuck, who studied graphic art. It's a real technique with a name, scratch art, taught as a college course. He made pictures of elk where all you see is a line of color coming through the dark.

Black isn't only the color of sympathy and death and evil.

It's what gets laid on last.

Every color under it is still there. Scratch once and it's right where you left it. It looks like absence and it's actually a layer — one color on top of the ones you put down first.

What the Exercise Is Actually Saying

Two things, and they work at different depths.

The first is about the colors. They're not gone. The black went on top of them, which is a different operation from erasing them, and I'd been treating the two as the same thing. The bad times in that marriage did not reach back and unmake the good ones. They covered them.

The second is about effort, and Sharon was specific about it. You don't dig deep to do this. You take something in your hand and you scratch through it. One pass with a penny.

I find that oddly encouraging. The recovery of a good memory isn't excavation. It doesn't require you to justify anything or resolve anything or decide the relationship was worth it on balance. You scratch once and the color is right there, immediately, because it never left.

The Direction It Runs

In a different conversation, Sharon said the more you're able to say *Lord, thank You for the good of it. Thank You for the wonderful feelings I had, and I'm grateful for that.*

Then: if we're grateful for the good, it overtakes the bad.

Notice the direction. The way I'd always assumed it worked is that bad experience overtakes good — that's the whole reason I was afraid of losing the good days, because the ending seemed to be swallowing them.

She's saying the traffic runs the other way too, and that gratitude is what sends it that direction. Not denial. Not deciding the bad wasn't bad. Naming the good specifically enough that it stops being a general sense of loss and becomes actual days you can thank God for.

I said even the wonderful feelings?

Naomi Renamed Herself

Naomi goes to Moab with a husband and two sons and comes back with none of them.

She arrives in Bethlehem and the whole town stirs. The women say, *Can this be Naomi?*

And she tells them: don't call me Naomi. Naomi means pleasant. Call me Mara, which means bitter, because the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

Then: *I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty.*

Ruth is standing right there.

The young woman who has just refused to leave her, who has sworn that Naomi's people will be her people and Naomi's God her God, who has walked out of her own country to be with this woman — that woman is standing beside her while Naomi announces to the town that she has come back empty.

And Ruth will marry Boaz, and their son will be the grandfather of David, and the whole line runs through this moment that Naomi is describing as emptiness.

She wasn't lying. She'd lost a husband and two sons and she was in agony. But she had covered the whole canvas in black and named herself after it, with the brightest color in her life standing at her elbow.

Nobody in the story corrects her. Near the end, the women of the town tell her that her daughter-in-law is worth more to her than seven sons, and then the book closes with the line running down to David.

What You Might Do

Do the exercise. Actually do it — paper, crayons, a penny. It takes ten minutes and it does something that reading about it doesn't.

Then, on a separate page, write down three good things from the season you're grieving. Not conclusions about the relationship. Days. A specific morning, a specific conversa-

tion, something that happened once and was good when it happened.

Then thank God for them out loud, one at a time.

If that feels like a betrayal of how it ended, maybe that's the black talking. The colors are still on the paper. You put them there and they're not gone.

For a time all I could see was the black.

There's more to it.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that nothing good is ever actually erased. Thank You that You saw every good day we had, and that You have not thrown them away even when we have. Lord, for those of us who have covered a whole season in one color and named ourselves after it — would You put something in our hand and let us scratch a line through? Show us what's underneath. Give us the courage to be grateful for the good of it without pretending about the rest. And where somebody like Ruth is standing right beside us while we announce that we've come back empty, open our eyes. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. Read Ruth 1:19-22. What does Naomi rename herself, and why? Who is standing next to her while she says she has come back empty?
2. Do the crayon exercise. What did you notice when you scratched through the black?
3. Write down three specific good days from the season you're grieving. Not conclusions — days. Can you thank God for them out loud?
4. Sharon said that gratitude for the good overtakes the bad. What would it take to test that?

Chapter 27: Mark It

“In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them...” (Joshua 4:6-7).

I sat down one day and made a list of every way I felt hurt.

I got to forty-eight.

Then I thought of a couple more while I was working.

I took it outside to my fire pit. I wasn't always sure who had hurt whom. But where I felt hurt, I went down the page and prayed through each one, and forgave each one out loud, separately.

Then I crumpled the paper and lit it.

Why It Had to Be a List

I could have prayed a general prayer of forgiveness. I'd done that. It's what I'd been doing for months, and it kept not taking.

The trouble with a general prayer is that it has nothing to grip. I forgive it all sounds enormous and generous, and it slides right off, because the thing that actually keeps me awake at two in the morning isn't all of it. It's item nineteen. One specific sentence somebody said on a specific afternoon.

Forty-eight may seem like a lot, but you can't put down what you haven't picked up and named. I had been carrying forty-eight separate things while telling myself I was carrying one big thing, and the one big thing was too vague to hand over.

Going one at a time takes a while. And it's worked for me and for many others.

Why It Had to Burn

I could have prayed the same forty-eight prayers indoors and thrown the paper away.

A friend of mine works with youth groups and does what he calls rites of passage with them. Part of it is exactly this — write down the things you want to leave behind, and then burn them, together, where everyone can see it.

He's not being theatrical. He's doing something for people who need a moment they can point to afterward.

Because a decision made only in your head has no location. When I went looking for mine later, at two in the morning, when item nineteen came back around, there was nothing there to find. Just a memory of having decided, which feels identical to a memory of having intended to decide.

A fire has a location. There was a night, there was a pit, there was paper, there were ashes in the morning.

That's worth having when the thing comes back. What burning it gives you isn't immunity. It's an answer: *I have already dealt with that one. I know when. I know where I was standing.*

The Man Who Needed to Go Under

I talked with a man once whose marriage had ended.

He'd been planning a trip to Israel to be baptized, and the trip had been canceled. And he said he still felt like he needed to be baptized. Then he asked whether that was bad to wait — whether he should just do it.

He asked if he could splash some water on himself.

I said that for this one, I thought he might want to go under.

Do you have a bathtub? A jacuzzi?

What I think he was after was something physical — a cleansing — something he could go through, on a particular day, that would mark the end of one thing and the start of another. He felt unclean, and he wanted something new, and words weren't going to do it.

I don't think that instinct is childish. I think it's older and better than the reasoning we usually put over the top of it.

I mentioned the baptism idea to Sharon, and she told me this kind of cleansing has a name. A *mikvah*. It goes back centuries before John was standing in the Jordan, and the Jewish world used it for many reasons and many seasons — a bar mitzvah, a marriage, a ritual washing at the door of a home. A cleansing. A letting go of what was behind and a step into what was ahead.

Sharon said it clearly: *you need to leave some stuff at the bottom of the water.*

Here's water. What hinders you?

The Stones in the River

When Israel crossed the Jordan, God had them do something odd before they moved on.

Twelve men, one from each tribe, went back into the riverbed and each carried out a stone from where the priests had been standing. They stacked them at the campsite.

And the reason God gave for it is about the future.

In the future, when your children ask you, "What do these stones mean?" tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant.

The stones aren't for the crossing. They're for the argument thirty years later about whether the crossing really happened the way anybody remembers.

Samuel does the same thing at Mizpah after the Philistines are driven back. He sets up a stone and names it Ebenezer, which means stone of help, and says: *Thus far the LORD has helped us.*

Thus far. Not *from now on.* He isn't claiming the rest of it. He's marking the distance already covered so that nobody can pretend later that it was never covered.

Your brain may tell you that nothing has changed and that you've made no progress and that your future is empty. That claim is very difficult to sustain in front of a pile of rocks.

What You Might Do

Make the list. All of it. Don't be embarrassed by the number.

Then take it somewhere and go through it one item at a time, out loud, and forgive each one as its own thing. Not as a category. Some of them will be small enough to feel silly. Do them anyway. The small ones are often the ones still drawing blood.

Then mark it. Burn the paper, or bury it, or go under water, or drive somewhere and stand there and say something out loud. It matters less what the ceremony is than that it has a place and a date.

And take a photograph of it, or write down where you were. You'll want the evidence.

Forty-eight items. One fire.

You can argue with a memory. It's much harder to argue with ashes.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You have always given Your people something to touch — stones, water, bread, ashes. Thank You that You know we forget, and that You have never treated our forgetting as a lack of faith. Lord, for those of us carrying a long list we've never actually named — give us the honesty to write it down and the grace to go through it one line at a time. Meet us at whatever fire or river we bring it to. And when it comes back, as it may, remind us of the time we dealt with it, and let that be enough. Thus far You have helped us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Read Joshua 4:1-9 and 1 Samuel 7:12. What are the stones for, and who are they for? What does “thus far” mean in Samuel’s sentence?*
- 2. Make the list. How many items are on it? Does anything surprise you about the number, or about which ones came first?*
- 3. Is there an item on your list that comes back at two in the morning? Has it ever been named on its own, or only as part of the whole?*
- 4. What would your ceremony be — fire, water, a drive, a stone on a shelf? When will you do it?*

Chapter 28: They Need Something You Have

“Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in Him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I ever did’” (John 4:39).

I asked Siri to call somebody and Siri called somebody else.

A different name in my contacts. A man I hadn’t spoken to in years — not estranged, just one of those friendships that goes quiet without anybody deciding anything.

He picked up. And rather than explain that I’d misdialed, I said hello and asked how he was.

We talked for ten or fifteen minutes. Back and forth, catching up, the ordinary business of two men who used to know each other well.

And the whole time I was running an argument in my head.

I should tell him about the marriage.

I don’t want to tell him about the marriage.

I was embarrassed. That’s the word for it. I didn’t want to say it out loud to somebody who’d known me before, who had a picture of me from years ago that was about to be corrected.

I told him anyway. Got married, and then divorced, and here’s roughly how that went.

What He Said

When I finished, he was quiet for a second.

Then he said, “Eric, I have got to tell you something. And this is definitely God.”

Forty-five minutes before I called, he had ended an affair.

He'd been seeing a woman for about a month. And forty-five minutes before my phone dialed the wrong name, he had called her to say he couldn't do it — that he couldn't sleep, that he couldn't go on with it, that it was over.

He said he'd known he had to tell somebody. He said when he saw my call come in, he knew I was the one.

And then he told me the rest of it, and we talked about what he was going to do, and whether he could tell his wife, and what she'd ask him, and what he'd say. I told him it might be all or nothing at this point. I told him not to jump into anything that afternoon. We made a plan to have lunch.

What Opened Him

He didn't open up because I said something wise. I hadn't said anything wise. He opened up after I told him the thing I'd spent fifteen minutes trying to talk myself out of telling him.

One of the most humbling facts of my life turned out to be the key that fit that particular door.

Nothing else in my possession would have done it. Not thirty years of ministry. Not the books. Not any amount of gentle, skilled asking.

He needed to know he was talking to somebody whose life had also come apart.

Why It Works

Sharon put language to this.

“When we minister out of our own pain, the healing comes to us first.”

Not to them. To us, first.

And the reason she gave is practical rather than mystical. Because we're ministering as we normally would, and we're not trying to put up a facade.

The facade is the expensive part. Being the man who has it together, in front of people who need something from you, costs enormously and constantly.

Take the facade away and the same conversation happens for a fraction of the price.

We both confessed something on that call. Neither of us had wanted to.

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed (James 5:16).

Each other. There's no patient and no doctor in that sentence.

I got off that call in better shape than I got on it. So did he.

The Woman at the Well

Jesus sits down at a well at noon, which is the wrong time of day to draw water, and a woman comes out alone, which is the wrong way to draw water.

Both of those details point the same direction: she seems to be arranging her life to avoid the other women of the town.

They talk. He tells her about her five husbands and the man she's with now.

And she leaves her water jar and goes back into that town — the town she'd apparently been avoiding — and says to the people: *come, see a man who told me everything I ever did.*

That's what she brings them. Not a doctrine. Not an argument. The one fact about herself she'd been organizing her whole life to keep out of conversation.

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in Him because of the woman's testimony.

Her testimony was her shame. It's the only thing she had that they hadn't already dismissed, and it turned out to be enough to bring a town out to a well in the middle of the afternoon.

Sharing about Christ is like one beggar telling another beggar where they found food.

That's exactly what she did. She wasn't qualified for it. She just knew where the food was.

What You Might Do

Somebody is going to ask you how you are, and you'll have the usual choice.

You don't have to tell everyone. There's a whole chapter here arguing that. But there will be conversations where you can feel that the honest version is what's called for, and where the only thing stopping you is that you'd rather not be seen that way.

That's the moment. Tell it, and then be quiet, and see what comes back.

You may find you're not the one who needed the conversation.

And don't wait until you've recovered enough to be a good example. They don't need a good example. They need somebody whose life also came apart and who is still here, still talking, still praying, still getting up in the morning.

That's a thing you have now. You paid a great deal for it.

I told him one of the worst things that had ever happened to me.

Forty-five minutes earlier he'd hung up the phone and sat there with nobody to tell.

I never meant to call him at all.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You waste nothing. Thank You that the thing we would most like to hide is often the only thing in our hands that can open somebody else's door. Lord, for those of us who feel we have nothing to offer anyone right now — would You show us that we're carrying something we didn't have a year ago? Give us the courage to say the true thing to the person in front of us and then stop talking. Take away the facade, and the exhaustion of keeping it up. And thank You that when we minister out of our own pain, You send the healing to us first. Use all of it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. Read John 4:1-30 and 4:39-42. What might the woman have been avoiding at the start of the passage, and what does she do at the end? What does she actually tell the town about Him?

2. Sharon said the healing comes to us first because we aren't putting up a facade. What does maintaining a facade cost you in an ordinary week?

3. Who have you not told, out of embarrassment, who might need to hear it? What's the conversation you've been steering around?

4. What do you have now that you didn't have a year ago? Name it clearly, without minimizing what it cost.

Conclusion: Unremarkable, Unchanged

The scan results came back with two words on them.

Unremarkable. Unchanged.

I read them and thought they were about the bleakest description of a man's life I'd ever seen in print. Nothing notable. Nothing different. Sixty-some years and here's your summary.

Then I remembered what they mean on a radiology report.

Unremarkable means there is nothing there worth remarking on. No mass, no bleed, no news. *Unchanged* means whatever was there before is exactly as it was — it hasn't grown, it hasn't spread, it isn't doing anything.

Those are the two best words in medicine. When a doctor says them, you go home.

What's Unchanged

Somewhere in the middle of all this, Sharon said something to me twice in one conversation.

You're still the man you were.

I had assumed the opposite. I assumed a thing this large had to have taken something out of me permanently — that whatever I'd been before was now the before, and I'd be operating on a reduced version for whatever was left.

It wasn't true. I'm still the man who wrote those books. I'm still the man those couples called. Thirty years of work didn't get retroactively canceled by one year, and the people I'd helped were not un-helped by what happened to me afterward.

The verdict I was braced for never came. Not from God, and — this surprised me more — not from the people who know me.

Unchanged.

What's Different

What's different is how I operate.

I know now what to say before I walk into a hard conversation, and I write it down first. I know I don't owe an account to everyone who asks for one. I know the difference between a person asking after me and a person collecting details. I know that my hands shaking is a fact about my nervous system and not a verdict on my character.

I know that a fall is not the fall, that the pain of it will rewrite the good part if I lie there long enough, and that getting up quickly is how I protect what I loved.

I know that I held a standard stricter than God's and called it faithfulness, and I've stopped.

And I know that when I'm asked how I am, I can say the true thing, and that the true thing costs less than trying to maintain the managed version.

Sharon said to me: *Welcome to graduation day. You're never going to do this again. Your actions and reactions are going to be different now.*

She was right, and I'd have told you at the time that she was being kind.

What I Won't Tell You

I won't tell you that you'll be fine tomorrow or next week or next month.

You will get up. Possibly not today.

One Slice at a Time

It will be one slice at a time, and when you cut into one slice, some of the other slices will run into it — that's not a failure of the method, that's what pie does.

And it will still not be more than you can handle in a day. It will be more than you can handle all at once, which is why nobody is asking you to handle it all at once.

Somewhere in the middle of this, someone is going to need the exact thing you're most humbled by.

The Bench

There's a bench in Lexington, Illinois with Lana's name on it. I sit on it when I'm driving that way.

Nothing anywhere marks the other one. There was no service, no gathering, no casseroles, and no afternoon where the people who love me stood around in a room acknowledging that something had ended.

So I said at the beginning of this book that I was making one.

This book is it. It's a strange sort of marker — paper instead of stone, and made out of what somebody else said to me on twenty Wednesday mornings, and out of my own working through it.

But it has a date on it. And I know where I was standing.

Thus far the LORD has helped us.

Unremarkable. Unchanged.

I'll take it.

About the Author

Eric Elder is an author, speaker, and contemporary pianist with a passion for sharing Christ with others.

He is also an ordained pastor and a technology expert, having worked as a technology researcher for a Fortune 10 corporation for nine years prior to going into full-time ministry in 1995. This unique combination of skills led *USA Today* to call him “a new breed of evangelist,” referring to his groundbreaking work of sharing Christ online with thousands of people daily in over 160 countries.

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