

THE WOUNDED HEALER

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Ministering from Your Scars

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STUDY GUIDE

For individual reflection, small group processing, spiritual direction conversations, and ministry team development

How to Use This Study Guide

- For Individual Reflection
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"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves." — 2 Corinthians 4:7 (NASB)

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THE WOUNDED HEALER: Ministering from Your Scars

INTRODUCTION: The Paradox of Ministry

The alarm tones pierced the quiet of the firehouse at 2:37 AM. Structure fire, fully involved, possible entrapment. I swung my legs off the bunk, my boots already positioned for the fastest response, and reached for my turnout gear hanging on the rail. My hands knew the routine—had performed it thousands of times. But this time, they were shaking.

This was my first shift back after six weeks off. Six weeks that had felt like six years. Six weeks that had changed everything.

As I pulled on my bunker pants and coat, muscle memory took over while my mind raced somewhere else entirely. The other firefighters were already mounting the engine, focused, ready, professional. They gave me quick nods—nothing more. The brotherhood doesn't do sentimentality at 2:37 AM when someone might be dying. There'd be time for "welcome back" later, over coffee, if we all made it back.

But as I climbed into my seat and we pulled out into the night, sirens wailing, I was struck by the almost unbearable irony of my situation: I was racing toward a crisis to save someone else while I was still drowning in my own.

Six weeks earlier, I'd been the one who needed rescuing.

The details don't matter for this story—maybe they'll matter later, maybe not. What matters is that the man who had built his entire identity on being the rescuer, the strong one, the guy who ran *toward* the fire while everyone else ran away, had discovered he couldn't save himself. Depression had come like smoke, seeping into every corner of my life until I couldn't breathe. My marriage was fracturing. My relationship with my daughters had become a casualty of my emotional absence. And the faith that I thought would sustain me through anything felt like holding onto smoke.

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I'd spent those six weeks in what felt like my own kind of triage—therapy appointments, difficult conversations, medication adjustments, spiritual direction sessions where I had no answers and couldn't even formulate the right questions. I'd been the patient, the broken one, the man who couldn't fix himself.

And now here I was, expected to go fix someone else's disaster.

The engine screamed through empty streets, and I watched the familiar landscape blur past—the same route we'd taken hundreds of times to hundreds of emergencies. But I was different now. I'd crossed a threshold I couldn't uncross. I knew something about myself that I couldn't unknow: I was fragile. Breakable. Human.

As we rounded the corner and saw the orange glow painting the sky, my training kicked in. We pulled up, established water supply, got our assignments. I was on search and rescue—of course I was, that's what I'd always been good at. Find the victim, get them out, be the hero.

But as I made entry into that smoke-filled structure, following the wall, checking rooms, calling out for anyone who might still be inside, I was acutely aware that I was searching for someone while still feeling lost myself.

We found her in a back bedroom—an elderly woman, disoriented by smoke, frightened, unable to navigate her way to safety. I helped her to her feet, wrapped her in my coat, guided her toward the exit, my voice calm and reassuring through the mask: "I've got you. You're going to be okay. Just stay with me. We're almost out."

And then, in that moment—covered in soot and sweat, leading a terrified woman out of a burning building while my own life felt like it was still on fire—I understood something that would eventually change the entire trajectory of my ministry:

The wounded can still heal. The broken can still rescue. The lost can still guide others home.

But only if they're honest about their wounds.

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Only if they've let someone help them find the way.

Only if they stop pretending their scars don't exist.

THE MINISTRY PARADOX

Years later, when I traded my firefighter's badge for a pastor's collar and eventually a chaplain's credentials, I discovered that the church operates under many of the same illusions that I'd lived under at the firehouse. We believe—consciously or unconsciously—that ministers are supposed to be the unbroken ones, the people who have it all figured out, the spiritual firefighters who rescue everyone else but never need rescuing themselves.

We create an impossible standard: that those who lead must be invulnerable, that those who teach must have mastered everything, that those who counsel must have conquered their own struggles. We expect our pastors to preach about grace while living under the crushing weight of performance. We ask our ministry leaders to be human and divine simultaneously—accessible enough to relate to, but elevated enough to inspire.

And so ministers learn to hide. We hide our struggles behind sermon manuscripts and committee meetings. We hide our doubts behind theological degrees and confident pulpit voices. We hide our wounds behind professional distance and the armor of spiritual authority. We become experts at presenting the healed version of ourselves while the broken version bleeds out in private.

This creates what I've come to call "toxic woundedness"—ministering *from* our wounds rather than *with* our scars. And there's a critical difference.

When we minister from our wounds—from places of active bleeding, unprocessed trauma, unhealed brokenness—we inevitably wound others. The pastor whose father wound drives him to control his congregation with authoritarian leadership. The worship leader whose unaddressed shame manifests as narcissistic need for affirmation and spotlight. The children's minister whose own childhood trauma makes her either overly protective or dangerously oblivious to boundary violations. The counselor who uses his clients' stories to avoid dealing with his own.

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Ministering from wounds is unconscious, unintegrated, and ultimately destructive. It's like trying to perform surgery while you're actively hemorrhaging—your own crisis contaminates everything you touch.

But ministering *with* scars? That's something different entirely.

A scar is a wound that has healed. It's evidence of trauma that has been attended to, treated, and integrated. Scar tissue is actually stronger than the original tissue it replaces—it's the body's way of saying, "Something terrible happened here, and we survived it, and we're better prepared now for what comes next."

When we minister with our scars, we bring the authority of someone who has been through fire and lived to tell about it. We bring empathy that can only come from shared experience. We bring wisdom earned through suffering and humility learned through rescue. We bring the kind of credibility that no seminary degree can provide—the credibility of authenticity.

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Catholic priest whose own struggles with depression, loneliness, and identity would eventually lead him to write the foundational book on this topic (*The Wounded Healer*, published in 1972), understood this paradox better than perhaps anyone:

"Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not 'How can we hide our wounds?' but 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?'"

Nouwen wasn't advocating for parading our trauma or using our pain as a badge of honor. He was inviting us into a more honest, more human, more *incarnational* way of being in ministry. He was suggesting that our wounds, properly healed and integrated, become our greatest credentials for authentic service.

The Apostle Paul understood this when he wrote to the church in Corinth—a church that was, like many churches today, obsessed with spiritual credentials and impressive résumés:

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"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." (2 Corinthians 1:3-4, NASB)

Read that again slowly. Paul is establishing a profound theological principle: The comfort we receive in our affliction is not just *for* us—it's also *through* us, meant to flow to others who are afflicted. Our healing is meant to be generative, reproductive, contagious. The mercy God shows us in our mess becomes the mercy we extend to others in theirs.

This is the ministry paradox: We are most useful to God and others not in spite of our brokenness, but often *because of* it—provided we've allowed that brokenness to be touched by healing grace and transformed into something redemptive.

But here's where we need to be extremely careful, and why this book exists:

There's a timing issue that must be honored. There's a process that cannot be rushed. There's a difference between "I'm going through this" and "I've been through this and lived to tell about it."

You cannot give away a comfort you haven't yet received. You cannot minister healing from a wound that's still actively bleeding. You cannot be a guide through territory you're still lost in yourself.

This is not about perfection—it's about integration. It's not about being "over it"—it's about being honest about it. It's not about having all the answers—it's about being far enough along in your own journey that you can walk beside someone else on theirs without getting lost yourself.

FROM WOUNDS TO SCARS: A NECESSARY JOURNEY

If you're reading this book, chances are you fall into one of several categories:

You might be a minister—pastor, chaplain, counselor, lay leader—who is acutely aware of your own wounds and wondering if they disqualify you from service. You're terrified that if people knew the truth about your struggles, they'd lose confidence in your ability to lead them spiritually.

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You might be someone who has already been wounded *by* ministry—betrayed by church leadership, spiritually abused by toxic systems, damaged by well-meaning but unhealthy ministry relationships. You're trying to figure out if you can ever trust religious community again, much less serve within it.

You might be in active crisis right now, reading this through tears, wondering if you'll survive what feels like a category-five hurricane tearing through your life. You can barely imagine ministering to anyone else when you're struggling to minister to yourself.

Or you might be further along in your healing journey, beginning to see how God might redeem your story, but uncertain about how to move forward. You're discovering that your wounds are becoming scars, and you're wondering what that means for your calling.

Wherever you are on this continuum, I want you to know something: This book is written for you by someone who has been where you are. I write not as an expert who has figured it all out, but as a fellow traveler who has been through enough healing to be able to look back and see the path, and to look ahead with hope.

My credentials aren't impressive by the world's standards, but they might matter to you: I'm a retired firefighter who learned about rescue and crisis response. I'm an ordained pastor who has experienced both the beauty and brutality of institutional church. I'm a certified chaplain who sits with first responders, municipal employees, and business leaders in their worst moments. I'm a recovering codependent who runs a ministry specifically for people healing from toxic relationships. I'm a father who has wounded his own children and is learning the slow, painful work of repair. I'm a husband who has failed and recommitted and failed again and keeps showing up.

I'm a ragamuffin—to use Brennan Manning's beautiful term—a messy, broken, in-process human being who has discovered that Jesus seems to specialize in exactly my type.

I don't write this book because I've arrived. I write it because I've survived. And because I've discovered that survival, when it's been touched by grace, becomes a story worth telling.

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The journey from wounds to scars is not a straight line. It's not a simple process. It doesn't happen on our timeline or according to our preferences. But it *does* happen, if we're willing to do the work, seek the help, and trust the process.

This book is a map for that journey—not because I've walked every step perfectly, but because I've stumbled through enough of it to recognize the landmarks.

THE SHAPE OF THE JOURNEY

This book is structured around five movements, each representing a critical phase in the journey from wounded minister to healed healer:

Part One: Recognizing the Wound begins with the hardest step—acknowledging that something is broken. We'll explore the various types of wounds ministers carry, how to identify them honestly, and why hiding them makes them toxic. This section will feel uncomfortable because all good healing starts with accurate diagnosis. You can't treat what you won't acknowledge.

Part Two: The Healing Journey walks through the actual process of moving from wound to scar. We'll talk about giving yourself permission to be broken, the necessary season of lament, finding safe community, and encountering the scandalous grace that makes healing possible. This section is about doing the inner work that ministry requires but rarely makes space for.

Part Three: The Integration explores what happens when wounds begin to close and scars begin to form. We'll examine how to redeem your story, what it means to die to self without destroying self, and how the cross becomes the pattern for all redemptive suffering. This is where your story starts to shift from tragedy to testimony.

Part Four: Ministry from Scars is where we discover what authentic, scar-informed ministry actually looks like. We'll talk about the unique authority that comes from suffering, how to have compassion without codependency, when to speak from your scars and how much to share, and what it means to be truly present to others' pain when you carry your own. This is where wounds become credentials.

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Part Five: Sustaining Wholeness addresses the long game—how to build resilience for the marathon of ministry, what to do when old scars tear open, and how to create sustainable rhythms that honor both your calling and your humanity. This is about staying healthy for the long haul.

Throughout this journey, we'll be accompanied by voices of wisdom—theologians and practitioners who have walked this path before us. We'll be grounded in Scripture, particularly in the NASB translation, allowing God's Word to illuminate the path. And we'll be honest about the messy, non-linear reality of healing.

AN INVITATION, NOT A FORMULA

I need to be clear about something before we go further: This book is not a quick fix. It's not five easy steps to turn your trauma into triumph. It's not a formula for painless transformation or instant ministry success.

If you're looking for that kind of book, I'm going to save you some time: This isn't it.

What this book *is* is an invitation into the slow, sacred, often painful work of allowing God to transform your deepest wounds into your most powerful ministry. It's an invitation to stop pretending you're not broken and to start discovering how God specializes in working with broken things. It's an invitation to trade the exhausting performance of invulnerability for the freedom of honest, integrated wholeness.

It's an invitation to discover that your scars—those marks of survival, those signs of battles fought and grace encountered—might be exactly what qualifies you for the ministry God has called you to.

That night, pulling that elderly woman out of her burning house, I couldn't have articulated what I now understand: Sometimes the very thing that makes us feel disqualified is actually what makes us uniquely qualified. Sometimes our greatest weakness becomes our greatest strength. Sometimes the wound becomes the doorway to the most authentic ministry we'll ever offer.

But it only works if we're willing to let the wound heal into a scar. If we're willing to do the work. If we're willing to stop hiding and start healing.

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That's the journey we're about to take together.

I won't lie to you—it's not easy. But I can promise you this: It's worth it.

And you don't have to do it alone.

So let's begin where all honest ministry must begin: with acknowledgment.

Let's pull back the curtain on the wounds we carry, the scars we're earning, and the redemptive work that happens when we stop pretending to be superhuman and start embracing our beautiful, broken, redeemable humanity.

The firehouse alarm is sounding. The crisis is real. Someone needs rescue.

But this time, maybe that someone is you.

And maybe—just maybe—that's exactly where your most powerful ministry will begin.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

Let's discover together what it means to receive that comfort, to be healed by that mercy, and then to extend it to a world full of wounded people who are desperately waiting for a healer who knows what it's like to bleed.

Welcome to the paradox.

Welcome to the journey.

Welcome to the life of the wounded healer.

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PART ONE: RECOGNIZING THE WOUND

"We cannot heal what we will not acknowledge"

CHAPTER 1: The Minister's Secret Pain

The senior pastor of one of the largest churches in the metro area sat across from me in the hospital cafeteria, picking at a sandwich he had no intention of eating. His admission had been quiet—no press release, no announcement to the congregation. Just a sudden "sabbatical for health reasons" that the board announced on Sunday morning while he was being admitted to the psychiatric unit upstairs.

"I've been preaching about abundant life for twenty-three years," he said, staring at his untouched coffee. "I've told thousands of people that Jesus sets them free. I've counseled hundreds of marriages. I've performed I don't know how many funerals, telling grieving families that there's hope beyond the grave." He finally looked up at me, and I saw something I'd seen a thousand times in my firefighting career—the eyes of someone who'd been holding their breath underwater for too long. "And the whole time, I wanted to die."

He wasn't exaggerating. Three days earlier, he'd written a suicide note, sat in his car in the church parking lot at 2 AM with a bottle of pills, and somehow—he still couldn't explain it—called a crisis line instead of taking them. The voice on the other end had convinced him to drive to the emergency room. Now he was forty-eight hours into a seventy-two hour psychiatric hold, and his entire congregation thought he had the flu.

"I'm supposed to be the one with the answers," he whispered. "How can I lead them if I'm this broken?"

Across town, in a counselor's office tucked away in a professional building far from any church she'd ever served, a hospital chaplain sat in the client's chair for the first time in her life. She'd spent fifteen years sitting bedside with dying patients, holding the hands of grieving families, praying with people in their darkest moments. She had advanced degrees in pastoral care and crisis counseling. She was certified in grief therapy. She supervised other chaplains.

And she was completely unraveling.

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"I can't do this anymore," she told her therapist, a woman she'd chosen specifically because she had no connection to the faith community. "I go to work and I'm present for everyone's trauma. I hold their pain. I pray with them. I cry with them. And then I come home and I can't feel anything. It's like I've used up all my emotional capacity on other people's suffering, and there's nothing left for my own life."

She described what the textbooks call compassion fatigue, but what felt to her like something darker—a slow erasure of herself. "I don't know who I am anymore when I'm not chaplaining," she said. "I don't know if there's anything left of me underneath the collar."

The therapist asked a simple question: "When was the last time someone took care of you?"

The chaplain started crying and couldn't stop for twenty minutes. Because the answer was never. The answer had always been never. She'd been the caretaker since childhood—the oldest daughter in an alcoholic family, the one who kept things together, the one who grew up to professionalize her childhood survival skills into a ministry career. She'd spent fifty-three years taking care of everyone else and had never once asked for help.

Until now, when she literally couldn't function anymore.

The worship leader was thirty-one years old, had a voice that could make grown men weep during the bridge of "How Great Thou Art," and was high on cocaine in the church bathroom fifteen minutes before the second service started.

He'd been using for six months. It started at a party—just social, just fun, just a way to feel something other than the constant pressure of performance. But cocaine has a way of not staying recreational, especially when you're self-medicating wounds you won't acknowledge.

He looked at himself in the mirror, at the dilated pupils and the sweat on his forehead, and thought about the hundreds of people who would be singing along with him in a few minutes, hands raised, tears streaming, encountering the presence of God through his gift. They had no idea that the man leading them into worship was standing in a bathroom stall snorting lines off his iPhone screen.

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The cognitive dissonance was crushing. But not crushing enough to stop. Because the high was the only time he didn't feel the weight of being the pastor's kid who could never measure up, the gifted musician whose father told him he was wasting his life in church when he could have had a real career, the man whose wife had left him because "you love the spotlight more than you love me."

So he did another line, splashed water on his face, popped a stick of gum, and headed out to the platform. The band was already running through the pre-service sound check. The video screens were displaying the countdown clock. The congregation was filing in, ready to meet with God.

And the worship leader stepped up to the microphone, smiled his practiced smile, and said what he said every Sunday: "Let's worship together."

The secret would stay hidden for another four months, until he'd nod off at a stoplight with cocaine still on the passenger seat, and the police officer who knocked on his window would recognize him from church.

WHY MINISTRY ATTRACTS THE WOUNDED

These aren't hypothetical scenarios. They're composites of real people I've encountered in nearly two decades of chaplaincy work—real ministers carrying secret pain, serving from hidden wounds, slowly dying inside while appearing to thrive on the outside.

And here's what I've learned: They're not exceptions. They're the norm.

Ministry attracts the wounded. Not exclusively, but disproportionately. And once you understand why, it makes perfect sense.

Think about it: Who gravitates toward the helping professions? Who feels called to spend their life caring for others, teaching spiritual truth, leading people through crisis, offering comfort and hope? Often, it's people who discovered early in life that their value lay in being needed. It's people who learned that being the helper meant being safe, being important, being worthy of love and attention.

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Many of us who end up in ministry grew up in homes where we had to be the emotional caretakers. Maybe we had depressed parents who needed us to be the source of joy. Maybe we had addicted family members who needed us to be the responsible one. Maybe we had raging fathers who needed us to be the peacekeepers, or absent mothers who needed us to be the competent one who didn't require attention.

We learned early that our needs were secondary, that our pain wasn't as important as managing everyone else's, that love was something you earned through usefulness rather than something freely given just because you existed.

So we became helpers. Fixers. Rescuers. And eventually, we professionalized it. We went to seminary. We got ordained. We became pastors, chaplains, counselors, worship leaders, youth ministers. We turned our childhood survival strategy into a calling.

Please hear me: I'm not saying everyone in ministry is there for unhealthy reasons. I'm not suggesting that all ministers are just codependents with theological degrees. But I am saying that ministry provides a perfect ecosystem for the wounded to hide in plain sight, serving from their brokenness while calling it faithfulness.

Henri Nouwen understood this dynamic deeply. In his book *The Wounded Healer*, he wrote: "The great illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there."

But here's the paradox he was getting at: The leader *must* have been in the desert—that shared experience is what creates authentic connection and credible hope. But the leader also must have found the way *out* of the desert. You can't guide people through territory you're still lost in yourself.

The problem isn't that wounded people enter ministry. The problem is that ministry culture often prevents those wounds from healing. We create systems that reward performance over authenticity, that elevate image over integrity, that demand certainty when honest faith always includes doubt. We build structures that keep ministers isolated, exhausted, and terrified of being truly known.

And so the wounds stay hidden. They stay active. They stay toxic. And eventually, they leak out in ways that hurt both the minister and the people they're supposed to serve.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

THE PERFORMANCE TRAP

I learned about performance very early in my firefighting career. There were explicit standards—you had to be able to carry a certain amount of weight, climb a certain number of stairs in full gear, operate equipment with precision under pressure. Lives depended on your ability to perform.

But there was also an unspoken standard: You couldn't show weakness. You couldn't admit fear. You couldn't talk about the nightmares after the bad calls or the way your hands shook when you pulled a dead kid out of a car wreck. Real firefighters were tough. Strong. Unshakeable.

So we performed toughness. We joked at accident scenes. We kept our trauma to ourselves. We drank together and called it brotherhood, never acknowledging that we were all self-medicating our PTSD because asking for help would have been seen as weakness.

When I transitioned into ministry, I was shocked to discover the same culture, just with different language. Instead of physical toughness, it was spiritual certainty. Instead of fearlessness, it was unwavering faith. Instead of not needing therapy, it was not needing anything except Jesus.

The performance trap in ministry works like this: You're hired (or called, or elected, or appointed) to be the spiritual authority, the person with answers, the one who models what victorious Christian living looks like. Your congregation needs you to be strong when they're weak, faithful when they doubt, peaceful when they're anxious, joyful when they grieve.

They need you to be more than human.

And if you're already someone who learned early in life that your worth comes from being needed, from meeting others' expectations, from performing your role flawlessly—well, you're going to give them exactly what they need, even if it kills you.

You'll preach about grace while living under law. You'll counsel others to rest while you work seventy-hour weeks. You'll teach about the unconditional love of God while believing deep down that God's love for *you* is contingent on your ministry success. You'll present a version of yourself that's polished, together, victorious—and you'll hide the version that's struggling, doubting, barely hanging on.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The performance trap is especially insidious because it disguises itself as faithfulness. When you're constantly suppressing your own needs to serve others, it feels noble. When you're hiding your doubts to project certainty, it feels like protecting people's faith. When you're sacrificing your mental health for ministry effectiveness, it feels like taking up your cross.

But here's what I've learned the hard way: There's a massive difference between sacrificial service and self-destruction. There's a difference between healthy dying to self and toxic erasure of self. There's a difference between the cross and codependency.

Jesus died on the cross as a singular, redemptive act that accomplished salvation for humanity. He didn't die because He had poor boundaries. He didn't die because He didn't know how to say no. He didn't die because His identity was wrapped up in being needed. He died with agency, with purpose, with full awareness that this death would lead to resurrection.

When we perform our way through ministry, slowly dying inside while projecting life on the outside, that's not Christlike sacrifice. That's just slow suicide with a Bible verse attached.

Brennan Manning saw this clearly. In his brutally honest way, he wrote: "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable."

What Manning understood is that the performance trap doesn't just hurt us—it damages the witness of the Gospel. When people see ministers who preach grace but live in bondage to performance, who teach about freedom but are imprisoned by expectation, who talk about the peace of God but are clearly anxious and exhausted—they reasonably conclude that Christianity doesn't actually work.

Our secret pain, our hidden wounds, our unacknowledged brokenness—these don't just affect us. They contaminate everything we touch. They turn our ministry from life-giving to life-draining, from authentic to performative, from transformational to transactional.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

THE MYTH OF THE UNBROKEN SHEPHERD

Somewhere along the way, the church bought into a myth that's nowhere in Scripture: the myth of the unbroken shepherd.

This myth says that spiritual leaders should be people who have transcended normal human struggle, who have achieved a level of spiritual maturity that makes them essentially immune to the problems ordinary Christians face. They shouldn't struggle with depression or anxiety. They shouldn't have marital problems or parenting failures. They shouldn't doubt or question or wrestle with God.

This myth is everywhere in ministry culture. It's in the way we write job descriptions for pastoral positions, listing qualifications that would require someone to be basically superhuman. It's in the way we react with shock and betrayal when a minister falls or fails or admits struggle. It's in the way we set up our church governance, creating accountability structures that assume the problem is moral failure rather than human limitation.

It's in the way we do pastoral care—the pastor cares for the congregation, but who cares for the pastor? It's in the way we structure ministry schedules— evenings, weekends, holidays, all available for ministry demands, with family time and personal rest seen as optional luxuries. It's in the way we evaluate ministry success—by numbers and growth and impact, never by the minister's own health and wholeness.

The unbroken shepherd myth is attractive because it makes us feel safe. If the pastor has it all together, if the worship leader is spiritually victorious, if the youth minister has conquered all his demons—then maybe we can too. Maybe there's a level of Christian maturity we can achieve that will finally make us safe from pain and struggle and doubt.

But it's a lie. A dangerous, destructive lie.

Jesus Himself doesn't fit the model of the unbroken shepherd. He wept. He got angry. He felt forsaken. He experienced the full range of human emotion and struggle. The writer of Hebrews makes this explicit: "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15, NASB).

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Jesus can sympathize with our weaknesses because He experienced weakness. He was tempted. He suffered. He knows what it's like to be human in a broken world. That's not a flaw in His ministry—it's the foundation of it.

But somehow we've created a ministry culture that expects less humanity from our leaders than we see in Jesus. We expect them to be strong when Jesus wept. We expect them to be certain when Jesus questioned. We expect them to be invulnerable when Jesus bled.

Eugene Peterson spent his entire ministry pushing back against this myth. He wrote: "The pastoral vocation is not a glamorous vocation. It's a vocation of witness to the people we're with, in the place we're in, at the time we're in it."

Notice what Peterson *doesn't* say. He doesn't say pastoral ministry is a vocation of having all the answers. He doesn't say it's a vocation of being spiritually superior. He doesn't say it's a vocation of never struggling or doubting or failing.

He says it's a vocation of *witness*. Of being present to people. Of being real and human and honest about what we've seen and experienced. Of pointing to Christ not from a position of arrival but from a position of companionship on the journey.

The myth of the unbroken shepherd tells ministers they must hide their humanity. But the Gospel says that God specializes in using broken people. Moses had a speech impediment. David was an adulterer and murderer. Peter denied Christ three times. Paul had a thorn in the flesh he begged God to remove. The entire biblical narrative is God working through deeply flawed, profoundly human people who brought their brokenness honestly into the presence of a redeeming God.

Why would we expect modern ministers to be any different?

WHY WE HIDE THE WOUNDS

If the myth of the unbroken shepherd is a lie, if ministry cultures that demand performance are toxic, if the biblical pattern is actually for broken people to be used by God—then why do we hide our wounds?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The answer is both simple and complex: We hide because we're afraid.

We're afraid of being judged. Ministry is one of the few professions where moral failure or psychological struggle can end your career. A lawyer can get divorced and still practice law. A doctor can have depression and still practice medicine. But a pastor who admits struggle often faces immediate consequences—removal from leadership, termination of employment, loss of credibility, destruction of reputation.

We've all seen it happen. The minister who admitted to an affair and was immediately fired, his family evicted from the parsonage within days. The worship leader who confessed to addiction and was escorted out of the building by elders who didn't want him "contaminating" the ministry. The youth pastor who checked into rehab and came back to find her position filled and her access to the church revoked.

The message is clear: Struggle in secret or lose everything.

We're afraid of disappointing people. When you've built your life around meeting others' needs and expectations, the thought of letting people down is unbearable. Your congregation believes in you. They trust you. They need you to be their rock when everything else is shifting. How can you tell them that you're the one who's crumbling?

I remember the first time I admitted to my board that I was struggling with depression. I was terrified. These were good people who loved me and supported me, but I'd always been the strong one, the one who had it together, the one who could handle anything. What would they think of me if they knew I couldn't even handle my own mental health?

The fear of their disappointment was almost paralyzing. What if they lost respect for me? What if they questioned whether I should be leading them? What if they looked at me differently, with pity instead of trust?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

We're afraid of being alone. Ministry is already isolating—you're in a unique role, with unique pressures, and most people can't really understand what it's like. Many ministers have no close friends because the nature of the position creates a professional distance. You can't really be vulnerable with your congregation—they need you to be their pastor, not their peer. You can't be fully honest with your denominational supervisors—they're evaluating your performance. You can't even be completely open with other ministers—there's often competition and comparison in clergy circles.

So many ministers live in profound loneliness, and the fear is that if they admit their struggles, they'll be even more alone. At least now, people need them. At least now, people want them around. But if they admit they're broken, will anyone stay?

We're afraid it's true. This is perhaps the deepest fear: What if our wounds really do disqualify us? What if we really aren't cut out for ministry? What if our struggles mean we've failed God, disappointed Christ, proven ourselves unworthy of the calling?

These fears aren't irrational. They're based on real experiences in real ministry contexts. The church has not historically been a safe place for vulnerable leaders. We've created cultures that punish honesty and reward performance. We've established systems that protect the institution over the individual. We've elevated people who project strength and sidelined people who admit weakness.

But here's what those fears cost us:

When we hide our wounds, they don't heal—they fester. Unacknowledged pain doesn't just go away. It goes underground, where it grows toxic and eventually erupts in ways far more destructive than if we'd addressed it honestly from the beginning. The pastor who hides his depression ends up suicidal. The chaplain who won't acknowledge her compassion fatigue ends up emotionally numb. The worship leader who self-medicates his shame ends up addicted.

When we hide our wounds, we minister from them instead of with them. Our unhealed brokenness becomes the lens through which we see and serve others. The father-wounded pastor becomes controlling and authoritarian. The abandoned worship leader becomes narcissistic and needy. The traumatized counselor becomes either rigidly boundaryed or dangerously enmeshed. We don't intend to hurt people, but hurt people hurt people—it's just what happens when wounds go untreated.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

When we hide our wounds, we perpetuate the myth. Every time a minister presents a false version of wholeness while hiding real brokenness, we reinforce the lie that spiritual maturity means not struggling. We tell the person in the pew that they're failing if they're not victorious, that they're weak if they need help, that their honest struggles disqualify them from serving God. We become the very thing Manning warned about—Christians who acknowledge Jesus with our lips but deny Him by our lifestyle.

When we hide our wounds, we miss the opportunity for redemption. God is in the business of redeeming stories, transforming trauma, bringing beauty from ashes. But redemption requires honesty. It requires bringing our brokenness into the light, allowing it to be seen and touched and healed. When we hide in darkness, we prevent the very healing that could transform our wounds into scars—and our scars into credentials for powerful, authentic ministry.

THE PATH FORWARD

Scripture is unflinchingly honest about human brokenness. The Psalmist writes: "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3, NASB).

Notice the prerequisite: brokenhearted. The healing is for those who acknowledge the breaking. God binds up wounds that are brought into the light, not wounds that are hidden in darkness.

When Jesus began His public ministry, He was immediately confronted by religious leaders who questioned why He spent time with "sinners"—with people whose brokenness was visible and undeniable. His response reveals everything about how God works: "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick" (Matthew 9:12, NASB).

The sick get the physician. The broken get the healing. But you have to acknowledge that you're sick before you can receive treatment. You have to admit the wound before it can be bound up.

This is where the journey begins—not with having it all together, but with honest acknowledgment that we don't. Not with projecting strength, but with admitting weakness. Not with performing wholeness, but with confessing brokenness.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The pastor in the hospital bed took the first step when he called the crisis line instead of taking the pills. The chaplain in the counselor's office took the first step when she admitted she couldn't do it anymore. The worship leader took his first step when he finally told someone about the addiction, even though it cost him his position.

These weren't easy first steps. They were terrifying. They came with real consequences. But they were the beginning of healing, because you cannot heal what you will not acknowledge.

If you're reading this chapter and recognizing yourself—if you're the minister with secret pain, the leader hiding wounds, the helper who's never been helped—I want you to know something:

Your wounds do not disqualify you from ministry. But your unwillingness to acknowledge and address them might eventually destroy you.

You don't have to have it all figured out. You don't have to be the unbroken shepherd. You don't have to perform invulnerability while dying inside.

You can be human. You can be broken. You can need help.

And that doesn't make you weak—it makes you honest. It doesn't make you a failure—it makes you human. It doesn't disqualify you from serving God—it actually positions you to serve in the most authentic, powerful way possible.

But it starts here. With acknowledgment. With honesty. With bringing the wound into the light so it can finally begin to heal.

In the chapters that follow, we'll walk through what that healing looks like. We'll talk about the types of wounds ministers carry, the cost of leaving them untreated, and the journey from wound to scar. We'll explore what it means to sit in the ash heap, to find safe community, to encounter transforming grace.

But for now, for today, for this moment—just acknowledge it.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Whatever wound you're carrying, whatever pain you're hiding, whatever secret struggle you're managing alone—just acknowledge it. To yourself. To God. And if you can, to one safe person who can walk with you toward healing.

You don't have to perform anymore. You don't have to pretend. You don't have to be the unbroken shepherd.

You can be human. Beautifully, messily, authentically human.

And that's exactly the kind of person God specializes in healing.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What would it feel like to be fully known in your ministry context—wounds, struggles, doubts, and all? What specifically makes that thought either appealing or terrifying? Looking at your journey into ministry, can you identify any wounds or unmet needs that might have influenced your call to serve? How have those early experiences shaped the way you approach ministry today? Where do you most feel the performance trap in your ministry? What would happen if you stopped performing and started being honest about your limitations and struggles? The chapter distinguishes between "ministering FROM wounds" (toxic) and "ministering WITH scars" (redemptive). Can you identify any ways you might currently be ministering from unhealed wounds? What impact might that be having on the people you serve? What specific fears keep you from being more vulnerable about your struggles? Are those fears based on real experiences, cultural expectations, or assumptions about how people would respond? Who, if anyone, knows the truth about what you're really struggling with? If no one knows, what would it take to find one safe person to be honest with? Henri Nouwen said, "The great illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there." In what deserts have you been? How might those experiences actually equip you for ministry rather than disqualify you from it? What is one wound you're currently hiding that you might need to acknowledge before it becomes toxic? What would be the first small step toward bringing it into the light?

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." — Psalm 147:3 (NASB)

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The healing begins with acknowledgment. The redemption starts with honesty. The transformation requires bringing the wound out of hiding and into the light where God can finally touch it.

You don't have to carry it alone anymore.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 2: The Anatomy of Woundedness

Every firefighter learns triage in their first year of training. When you arrive at a mass casualty incident—a building collapse, a multi-car pileup, a disaster scene with more victims than you can immediately treat—you have to make rapid assessments. You can't treat everyone at once, and you can't treat everyone the same way.

Triage classification matters because treatment depends on accurate diagnosis.

We use a color-coded system: Black for deceased or unsalvageable. Red for critical, life-threatening injuries requiring immediate intervention. Yellow for serious but stable injuries that can wait. Green for minor injuries that are painful but not life-threatening. Each color determines the urgency and type of response.

I remember my first real mass casualty incident—a nightclub fire with dozens of victims in various states of injury. The smoke inhalation cases. The burns ranging from superficial to life-threatening. The trampling injuries. The psychological shock. As we moved through the chaos, we had to quickly assess: What kind of injury is this? How urgent is the need? What treatment does this require?

Get the triage wrong, and people die. Treat the yellow like they're green, and they deteriorate to red. Ignore the red while focusing on green, and you lose patients you could have saved. Misdiagnose the type of injury, and you apply the wrong treatment—which can be as dangerous as no treatment at all.

Twenty years later, sitting in counseling offices with ministers who are bleeding out emotionally and spiritually, I realize we desperately need the same kind of triage assessment for wounds of the soul. Because just like physical trauma, psychological and spiritual wounds come in different types, have different origins, require different treatments, and carry different levels of urgency.

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And just like in firefighting, misdiagnosis can be deadly.

The problem is that ministry culture rarely makes these distinctions. We treat all struggle as essentially the same thing—a "trial" to endure, a "testing" to strengthen faith, a "thorn in the flesh" to humble us. We apply the same Bible verses, the same spiritual platitudes, the same "pray more and trust God" remedies to radically different types of wounds.

We tell the minister with childhood trauma to just forgive and move on. We tell the pastor experiencing compassion fatigue to just rest for a weekend and get back to work. We tell the leader who's been betrayed by the church to just trust God's sovereignty and not be bitter. We tell the person in theological deconstruction to just read their Bible more and stop asking questions.

It's the spiritual equivalent of telling someone with a compound fracture to put a Band-Aid on it and walk it off.

Jeremiah called out this shallow approach in his own ministry context: "They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace,' but there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14, NASB).

Superficial healing. Surface-level treatment. Declaring peace over a wound that's still hemorrhaging underneath. It's malpractice—spiritual malpractice that leaves ministers wounded, isolated, and eventually destroyed by pain that was never properly diagnosed or treated.

So let's do some triage. Let's look at the different types of wounds ministers carry, understand what makes them distinct, and begin to understand why one-size-fits-all spiritual solutions don't work.

WOUND TYPE ONE: Childhood Trauma and Family of Origin Issues

The pastor who can't stop working sits in my office and tells me he doesn't know how to rest. "I feel guilty if I take a day off," he says. "Like I'm letting everyone down. Like I'm being lazy."

We dig a little deeper. His father was an alcoholic who drank away the family's money and couldn't hold a job. His mother worked three jobs to keep the family afloat. From the time he was eight years old, he was the "man of the house"—responsible, dependable, never allowed to be a burden.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

"I learned that my value was in being useful," he says quietly. "That love was something you earned by never needing anything and always being what other people needed."

He's fifty-three years old, and he's still that eight-year-old boy trying to earn love through usefulness. Except now he's killing himself through ministry overwork, and he has no idea how to stop because stopping feels like death.

This is childhood trauma—the deep wounding that happens when our fundamental developmental needs aren't met, when we grow up in environments of chaos, abuse, neglect, or conditional love. It's the wounds that form before we even have language to name them, that shape our attachment styles, our sense of self, our capacity for relationship, our core beliefs about whether the world is safe and whether we're worthy of love.

For many ministers, these are the deepest wounds we carry, and they show up in predictable patterns:

The helper who can't be helped learned early that their needs didn't matter, so they professionalized caretaking and lost the capacity to receive care.

The performer who can't stop achieving learned that love was conditional on success, so they turned ministry into an endless treadmill of proving their worth.

The people-pleaser who can't say no learned that conflict meant abandonment, so they sacrifice their own wellbeing to avoid disappointing anyone.

The controller who micromanages everything grew up in chaos and learned that survival meant maintaining rigid control over their environment.

The isolated leader who won't let anyone close learned that vulnerability meant pain, so they keep everyone at arm's length while dying of loneliness.

These aren't character flaws—they're survival strategies that worked in childhood but become prisons in adulthood. And ministry provides the perfect hiding place for them because they all look like virtue when you frame them correctly.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Overwork becomes "dedication." People-pleasing becomes "servant leadership." Control becomes "taking responsibility." Isolation becomes "maintaining professional boundaries." Performance becomes "excellence in ministry."

But underneath the spiritual language, these are wounds—deep, formative wounds that shape everything about how we show up in ministry and in life.

The treatment for childhood trauma isn't simply "forgive your parents and move on." It requires specialized therapeutic work—often trauma-focused therapy like EMDR or Internal Family Systems—that helps you understand how those early experiences shaped your brain's development, your nervous system's responses, your relational patterns. It requires grieving what you didn't get. It requires learning new ways of being in relationship. It requires, often, years of patient, skilled work.

And here's what's critical: You can't just pray away childhood trauma. Prayer is essential, but God designed the human brain and nervous system, and He often works healing through the therapeutic process He's given us wisdom to develop. Telling someone with complex PTSD to just "trust God more" is like telling someone with a broken leg to just "have more faith" instead of going to the emergency room.

WOUND TYPE TWO: Ministry Betrayal and Church Hurt

The youth pastor's voice shakes as she describes what happened. She'd been at the church for seven years, pouring her life into the teenagers, seeing real transformation. Then one parent got upset about something she'd said in a lesson on sexuality—a biblically faithful, age-appropriate discussion that other parents appreciated.

Instead of talking to her directly, the parent went to the board. The board didn't investigate or ask for her side. They decided she was "causing division" and terminated her immediately. She had two weeks to vacate the church-owned apartment where she'd lived for seven years. They didn't give her a recommendation. They didn't allow her to say goodbye to the students. They just erased her.

"I gave them everything," she says, tears streaming down her face. "And they threw me away like I was nothing."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Ministry betrayal is its own unique category of wounding. It's the violation of trust that happens within the context of spiritual community—the place that's supposed to be safe, the people who are supposed to embody Christ's love, the relationships that are supposed to reflect the kingdom of God.

It takes many forms:

The senior pastor who sexually harasses or abuses staff while preaching about holiness every Sunday.

The board that fires a minister without due process when that minister becomes inconvenient or challenges their control.

The congregation that turns on a pastor when he admits struggle or makes a mistake, suddenly forgetting decades of faithful service.

The ministry partner who betrays confidence and uses private information as ammunition in a power struggle.

The denominational leader who protects the institution at the expense of an individual minister who's been wronged.

The toxic church culture that spiritually abuses people through manipulation, control, and conditional belonging.

What makes ministry betrayal uniquely devastating is the spiritual component. When your boss at a secular job betrays you, it's painful and unjust, but it doesn't usually shatter your faith. When church leaders betray you—when the people who represent God treat you as disposable, when the community that preaches love embodies cruelty—it can destroy your ability to trust anything or anyone, including God Himself.

I've sat with ministers who left ministry because of church hurt and can't even drive past a church building without having a panic attack. I've counseled pastors who were so traumatized by their boards that they can't sit in a meeting room without dissociating. I've walked alongside worship leaders who were spiritually abused so thoroughly that they can't worship anymore without feeling sick.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The prophet Jeremiah knew about ministry betrayal. He was thrown into a cistern by the religious leaders he was trying to serve. He was rejected, mocked, and nearly killed for faithfully delivering God's message. His entire ministry was marked by betrayal from the people who should have received him.

The treatment for ministry betrayal isn't "just forgive and forget." It requires acknowledging the real trauma of what happened. It often requires trauma therapy. It requires finding safe spiritual community that can help you re-learn that not all churches are toxic, not all leaders are abusive, not all Christians are hypocrites. It requires time, space, and often a complete break from ministry environments until healing can occur.

And it's okay to be angry. It's okay to grieve. It's okay to acknowledge that what happened was wrong, unjust, ungodly. Premature forgiveness that bypasses the legitimate grief and anger only drives the wound deeper underground.

WOUND TYPE THREE: Moral Failures and Shame

The phone call comes at 11 PM. It's a pastor I've been mentoring, and I can hear in his voice that something is catastrophically wrong.

"I need to tell you something," he says. "Before you hear it from someone else."

He's been having an affair with a church member. It's been going on for six months. His wife just found out. He's telling the board tomorrow. His ministry is over.

"I'm such a hypocrite," he says, his voice breaking. "I've been preaching about faithfulness while betraying my wife. I've been counseling couples while destroying my own marriage. I'm the worst kind of fraud."

Moral failure is a category of wound that's different from the others because it's self-inflicted. We're not just victims—we're perpetrators. We've made choices that violated our own values, hurt people we loved, betrayed trust, broke sacred vows.

And the shame is crushing.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Ministers who experience moral failure often carry wounds from multiple categories. The affair usually has roots in childhood attachment issues or unaddressed marital problems. The embezzlement often stems from financial trauma or addiction. The explosion of anger that gets a pastor fired usually connects to deeper wounds of father-issues or unprocessed rage.

But regardless of the origin, the result is the same: devastating shame, often mixed with very real consequences—loss of position, fractured relationships, damaged reputation, shattered trust.

What makes this wound so complex is that it requires holding two realities in tension:

Reality one: You made real choices that caused real harm. You are responsible. The consequences are just. The people you hurt have a right to be angry and to protect themselves from further harm. You cannot minimize, excuse, or spiritualize away what you've done.

Reality two: You are not defined by your worst moment. You are still a beloved child of God. You are still redeemable. Your failure does not disqualify you from God's love or, eventually, from serving God again—though the form that service takes may look different than it did before.

The treatment for moral failure wounds requires full acknowledgment of what happened, genuine repentance (which means changed behavior, not just feeling sorry), making amends where possible, accepting consequences, doing the deep work to understand what led to the failure, and receiving the grace that can transform shame into something redemptive.

This is not a quick process. It's not a "confess and move on" situation. Real healing from moral failure might take years. It requires skilled counseling. It requires community that can hold both accountability and grace. It requires spiritual direction that helps you encounter a God who loves you even when you've failed spectacularly.

And here's what's crucial: Shame that isn't transformed becomes toxic. Shame that's buried rather than processed doesn't just go away—it metastasizes into self-hatred, depression, addiction, or eventual re-offense. Richard Rohr's warning is critical here: "If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

WOUND TYPE FOUR: Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

The hospital chaplain moves through her shift like a ghost. She's there physically, going through the motions, doing what needs to be done. But there's nothing behind her eyes. She's been doing this work for twelve years, and somewhere along the way, she stopped feeling anything.

She sits with grieving families and feels nothing. She prays with dying patients and feels nothing. She counsels trauma victims and feels nothing. It's not that she doesn't care—it's that she's used up her capacity to care. She's given and given and given until there's literally nothing left to give.

This is compassion fatigue, and it's the occupational hazard of caring professions. It's different from depression, though they often occur together. Depression is "I can't feel anything." Compassion fatigue is "I've felt too much for too long, and now I can't feel anything anymore."

Burnout is related but broader—it's the complete depletion that comes from chronic stress, unrealistic demands, and inadequate support or recovery time. It's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual exhaustion that makes you wake up dreading the day before it even starts.

The symptoms are predictable:

Emotional numbness or hypersensitivity (either can't feel anything or feels everything too intensely)

Cynicism and detachment (stop caring about the work or the people you serve)

Physical symptoms (migraines, digestive issues, insomnia, constant illness)

Spiritual dryness (can't pray, can't worship, can't connect with God)

Decreased effectiveness (can't concentrate, make decisions, or perform basic tasks)

Isolation and withdrawal (pull away from relationships and activities)

THE WOUNDED HEALER

What makes burnout and compassion fatigue so insidious in ministry is that the conditions that create them are often seen as normal and even virtuous. Working seventy-hour weeks? That's dedication. Having no boundaries between work and personal life? That's availability. Sacrificing family time and self-care for ministry demands? That's servanthood. Being on call 24/7 for emergencies? That's shepherding.

But you cannot pour endlessly from an empty cup. You cannot care for others indefinitely without being cared for yourself. You cannot sustain chronic stress without recovery. It's not about faith or commitment—it's about basic human physiology and psychology.

David Benner states it plainly: "We cannot give what we do not have. If we are not being transformed by the renewal of our mind, we cannot facilitate transformation in others."

The treatment for burnout and compassion fatigue requires actual rest—not a weekend off, but potentially months of sabbatical. It requires therapeutic support. It requires establishing real boundaries and sustainable rhythms. It requires sometimes stepping completely away from ministry until you've recovered enough to engage it healthily again.

And this might be the hardest thing for ministry-driven people to hear: Sometimes the most faithful thing you can do is stop. Sometimes continuing to serve from a depleted state is actually disobedient because it's not sustainable and it's not healthy for you or for the people you serve.

WOUND TYPE FIVE: Relational Fractures

I haven't spoken to my daughter Amy in two years. The conversation that ended our relationship was about my ministry—she told me I'd chosen the church over my family my entire life, that I was more present for strangers than for my own children, that I'd performed the role of devoted father while being emotionally absent.

She was right.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

I'd justified it all with spiritual language. I was doing God's work. I was answering a calling. I was serving the kingdom. But the truth was simpler and more painful: I'd sacrificed my relationship with my daughters on the altar of ministry success.

Relational fractures are the wounds that happen when ministry costs us our most important relationships. Marriages that collapse under the weight of ministry demands. Friendships that atrophy because there's no time or energy left to invest in them. Parental relationships that fracture because we gave our best to the congregation and our worst to our kids.

These wounds are complicated because they involve other people who have been hurt by our choices. We can't just "heal" these wounds through our own internal work—there are relationships that have been damaged, trust that's been broken, pain that's been caused to people we love.

And sometimes, like with my daughter, the fracture can't be immediately repaired. Sometimes the people we've hurt need distance. Sometimes they're not ready to reconcile. Sometimes the relationship can't go back to what it was before.

The treatment for relational fractures requires genuine repentance—acknowledging what we've done, taking full responsibility without excuses, expressing genuine remorse. It requires making amends where possible. It requires changed behavior, not just apologetic words. It requires giving people space and time to heal on their own timeline, not ours. It requires accepting that some relationships may never be fully restored.

And it requires looking honestly at the ministry systems that enabled us to prioritize wrong. Why did we think it was acceptable to sacrifice our families for ministry? What theological distortions allowed us to believe that was faithfulness rather than negligence? What ministry cultures created the conditions where this kind of relational destruction was normalized and even celebrated?

WOUND TYPE SIX: Theological Deconstruction

The pastor sits across from me looking both terrified and relieved. "I don't know if I believe anymore," he says. "Not the whole thing—I still believe in God, in Jesus. But all the certainty I used to have about... everything? It's gone."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

He's been in ministry for twenty-five years. He's taught thousands of people. He's written books. He's been interviewed on podcasts about his faith. And now, in his fifties, he's questioning things he once preached with absolute confidence.

He's deconstructing—the process of examining and often dismantling long-held beliefs, theological frameworks, and religious certainties. And in ministry culture, that's not just uncomfortable—it can feel like vocational suicide.

Theological deconstruction can be triggered by many things: Exposure to suffering that can't be explained by simple theological answers. Academic study that complicates previously clear doctrines. Recognition of harm done by theology we used to teach. Personal experiences that don't fit the framework we've been operating from. Encounters with people whose lives and faith challenge our categories.

What makes deconstruction a wound is the way it's often treated in ministry contexts. Instead of being seen as a natural part of mature faith development, it's seen as backsliding, doubt, compromise, or dangerous questioning. Ministers who admit they're deconstructing are often pushed out of their positions, viewed with suspicion, or told they need to "get right with God."

But the reality is that many of the great saints went through periods of profound questioning and theological reconstruction. Mother Teresa experienced decades of "dark night of the soul" where she couldn't feel God's presence. C.S. Lewis went through periods of doubt. Even Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The Psalmist gave voice to this repeatedly: "How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1, NASB). These aren't questions of weak faith—they're questions of honest faith.

The wound comes when the church can't hold space for honest questions, when ministers feel they have to fake certainty they don't feel, when the cost of admitting doubt is loss of vocation.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The treatment for wounds related to theological deconstruction requires safe space to question without judgment. It requires spiritual direction from someone who understands that deconstruction can be a necessary and holy process. It requires reading widely, thinking deeply, and giving yourself permission to not have all the answers. It requires finding communities that can hold paradox and mystery.

And sometimes it requires stepping away from ministry for a season while you figure out what you actually believe, separate from what you've been paid to proclaim.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WOUNDS AND SCARS

Here's what every emergency medical professional knows: A wound and a scar are fundamentally different things.

A **wound** is an active site of damage. It's open, bleeding, vulnerable to infection. It requires immediate attention, protection, and treatment. Touch it and it hurts. Expose it to pressure and it tears open. Leave it untreated and it gets worse—infected, gangrenous, potentially deadly.

A **scar** is a wound that has healed. It's closed, integrated into the surrounding tissue, no longer bleeding. It's actually stronger than the original tissue it replaced. It tells a story of survival. You can touch it without causing pain—though in certain conditions, it might be tender. It's permanent evidence that something happened, but it's no longer an active site of trauma.

The journey from wound to scar requires several things:

Time. You can't rush healing. Trying to close a wound before it's ready just traps infection inside. Some wounds heal quickly; others take years.

Treatment. Wounds need to be cleaned, sometimes debrided (dead tissue removed), protected from further damage, and given appropriate medical intervention.

Rest. Healing requires reducing stress on the wounded area. You don't run a marathon on a broken leg. You don't return to full activity while still actively bleeding.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Protection. Wounds need to be covered, kept clean, shielded from further trauma while they heal.

Integration. As a wound heals, new tissue forms that integrates with the old. The body literally rebuilds itself around the damage, creating something that's both new and continuous with what was there before.

The same is true for psychological and spiritual wounds. You cannot simply will them into scars. You cannot pray them away or quote Scripture over them and expect instant transformation. You cannot ignore them and hope they heal themselves.

Wounds require attention, treatment, time, and care. And until they become scars, you cannot minister effectively from them—you can only bleed on people.

Here's what I mean:

When you minister **from a wound**—from a place of active, unhealed trauma—you inevitably contaminate your ministry with your pain. The pastor with father wounds who can't receive correction becomes authoritarian and controlling. The worship leader with abandonment trauma who needs constant affirmation becomes manipulative and narcissistic. The counselor with unprocessed abuse history who over-identifies with clients becomes enmeshed and boundary-less.

When you minister **with a scar**—from a place of healed, integrated trauma—you bring hard-won wisdom, empathy born of experience, and the credibility of survival. The pastor who's been through depression and gotten help can sit with someone in crisis without being triggered. The worship leader who's recovered from addiction can lead authentically without needing the spotlight for validation. The counselor who's processed their own abuse can help others without losing themselves in their clients' stories.

The difference is everything.

And here's what I had to learn the hard way: You don't get to decide when a wound becomes a scar. You can't just declare yourself healed because you're tired of hurting or because ministry demands require you to be functional. Wounds become scars on their own timeline, through their own process.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Your job is to do the work—seek the help, engage the therapy, sit in the grief, receive the grace. And then, at some point that you can't predict or control, you'll realize that what once made you bleed now just tells a story.

HOW UNHEALED WOUNDS INFECT MINISTRY

I need to tell you about the worst season of my ministry. Not because I'm proud of it, but because it illustrates exactly what happens when you minister from wounds instead of scars.

I was three years into pastoring a small church plant, working another job to support my family, dealing with my own unacknowledged depression, and carrying massive father wounds I'd never addressed. My dad had been emotionally absent and critically harsh—nothing I did was ever good enough. I'd spent my entire life trying to earn his approval and failing.

So when I became a pastor, guess what I brought into ministry? All of that unhealed wounding. And guess how it showed up?

I became controlling and perfectionistic with my leadership team. I micromanaged everything because I didn't trust anyone to do it "right." I criticized people constantly, just like my father had criticized me. I created a culture of performance and fear, where people were terrified of disappointing me.

I didn't do this consciously. I genuinely believed I was pursuing excellence, maintaining standards, shepherding well. I had spiritual language for all of it. But the reality was simpler: I was bleeding my father wounds all over my congregation.

People started leaving. Not dramatically—just quietly, one family at a time. They'd stop showing up, and when I'd reach out, they'd give vague reasons about "God leading them elsewhere." But the truth was that I'd created an environment that felt unsafe, controlling, and conditional.

It took my associate pastor—a brave, kind man who I'm grateful for to this day—confronting me directly. "Jeff, you're wounding people the way you've been wounded. You're doing to them what your father did to you. And until you deal with that, this church is going to keep bleeding members."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

I was furious. Then defensive. Then, eventually, broken. Because he was right.

I'd been ministering from my wounds. And I'd infected my entire ministry with my unhealed trauma.

This is what happens when wounds go untreated:

We recreate our trauma. The pastor who was spiritually abused becomes spiritually abusive. The leader who was controlled becomes controlling. The minister who was shamed becomes shaming. We unconsciously perpetuate the very things that wounded us.

We attract and wound the vulnerable. Wounded leaders tend to gather wounded people, creating codependent systems where no one is healthy but everyone needs each other. The people-pleasing pastor attracts people-pleasers. The narcissistic worship leader attracts people who need to be needed. The controlling board attracts passive members who won't push back.

We make ministry about our needs. Unhealed wounds turn ministry into a platform for getting what we didn't get growing up. The pastor who needed approval seeks it from his congregation. The leader who felt invisible needs the spotlight. The minister who felt powerless needs control. We use people to medicate our pain.

We cannot tolerate what triggers us. If you have unhealed wounds around authority, you can't receive correction. If you have unhealed wounds around abandonment, you can't handle people leaving. If you have unhealed wounds around shame, you can't admit mistakes. Your wounds dictate what you can and can't navigate in ministry.

We burn out or blow up. Unhealed wounds require enormous amounts of energy to manage. You're constantly performing, hiding, controlling, medicating. Eventually, you either collapse from exhaustion or explode in crisis. The wound catches up with you.

Proverbs 18:14 (NASB) asks the haunting question: "The spirit of a man can endure his sickness, but as for a broken spirit, who can bear it?"

THE WOUNDED HEALER

You can endure a lot with physical illness. But a broken spirit—an untreated wound of the soul—eventually becomes unbearable. And when ministry leaders can't bear it anymore, the fallout affects everyone in their sphere of influence.

THE PATH TO TRIAGE

So where do you start? How do you begin to assess your own wounds, determine what needs treatment, and move toward healing?

First, **acknowledge what's there**. Go back through the six categories I've outlined. Which ones resonate? Where do you see yourself? Be honest—not performatively honest where you acknowledge surface struggles while hiding the deep ones, but actually honest.

Second, **get help with diagnosis**. Just like you wouldn't self-diagnose a physical illness, don't try to assess your psychological and spiritual wounds alone. See a therapist. Find a spiritual director. Talk to a trusted mentor. Let people who are trained in this help you understand what you're carrying.

Third, **understand that multiple wounds can coexist**. You might have childhood trauma *and* ministry betrayal *and* compassion fatigue. One wound doesn't cancel out another. Each needs its own attention and treatment.

Fourth, **stop the bleeding before you try to scar**. If you're in active crisis—suicidal ideation, active addiction, complete burnout—you need immediate intervention. This is red-level triage. Get to the emergency room, literally or figuratively. Everything else can wait.

Fifth, **accept that treatment takes time**. There are no shortcuts from wound to scar. You can't microwave healing. Some wounds will take months to treat. Others will take years. That's okay. Healing at your actual pace is better than performing fake recovery to meet someone else's timeline.

Finally, **recognize that you might need to step back from ministry while you heal**. This is the hardest one for most ministers to hear. But sometimes the most faithful thing you can do is say, "I can't serve from this place. I need to heal before I can help anyone else."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Richard Rohr's warning echoes in my mind constantly: "If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it."

Transform or transmit. Those are the options.

You can do the hard work of bringing your wounds into the light, getting proper treatment, allowing time for healing, and eventually discovering that those wounds can become scars—evidence of survival that gives you credibility and compassion in ministry.

Or you can keep hiding, keep performing, keep pretending the wounds don't exist. And you will bleed on everyone around you.

The choice is yours.

But please—for the sake of the people you serve, for the sake of your own soul, for the sake of the Gospel you represent—choose transformation.

Choose to acknowledge the wounds. Get them properly diagnosed. Seek appropriate treatment. Give them time to heal.

And discover that the God who heals the brokenhearted can take even your deepest wounds and transform them into scars that tell a story of grace, redemption, and hope.

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3, NASB).

But He can only bind up the wounds we're willing to acknowledge and bring into the light.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

As you read through the six categories of wounds, which one(s) did you immediately recognize in yourself? What was your emotional response to seeing your experience named? Using the firefighter triage system (red/yellow/green), how would you classify the urgency of the wounds you're carrying? Are any of them "red level" requiring immediate intervention? Where are you currently "ministering from wounds" rather than "ministering with scars"? Can you identify specific ways your unhealed trauma might be affecting your ministry, your relationships, or your leadership? Richard Rohr says, "If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it." Who in your life might you be "transmitting" your untransformed pain to? What patterns do you notice? Looking at the distinction between wounds and scars, honestly assess: Which of your struggles are still "open wounds" and which have genuinely become "scars"? What's the difference in how they affect you? What keeps you from seeking professional help (therapy, spiritual direction, medical intervention) for the wounds you're carrying? Are those reasons legitimate or are they forms of resistance to healing? If you were doing honest triage on yourself right now, what would proper "treatment" look like? What would need to change? What help would you need to seek? What patterns would need to stop? David Benner writes, "We cannot give what we do not have." What do you need to receive—what healing, what care, what transformation—before you can authentically give it to others?

"They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace,' but there is no peace."
— Jeremiah 6:14 (NASB)

No more superficial healing. No more pretending wounds are scars when they're still bleeding. No more spiritual Band-Aids on compound fractures.

It's time for honest triage. Accurate diagnosis. Proper treatment.

It's time to stop transmitting pain and start transforming it.

The journey from wound to scar begins with acknowledging what's actually there.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 3: The Cost of Unhealed Wounding

The phone call came from a board member at 11 PM on a Thursday. His voice was shaking. "We need you to come in tomorrow morning. Emergency meeting. The pastor—" He paused, struggling to find words. "We just found out what's been happening."

I arrived at the church office the next morning to find six board members, two denominational supervisors, and a stack of written testimonies. Over the next four hours, I listened to a pattern of spiritual abuse so systematic, so calculated, that it took my breath away.

The senior pastor—I'll call him David—had been at this church for twelve years. Under his leadership, the church had grown from 150 to nearly 800. He was a compelling preacher, a strategic leader, a vision-caster who could inspire people to dream big and give generously. From the outside, this was a success story.

From the inside, it was a horror show.

David controlled everything and everyone. Staff members who questioned his decisions were publicly humiliated in meetings. Congregants who expressed concerns were told they were "divisive" and "not submitting to God's anointed." Families who left the church were slandered from the pulpit. An elder who raised financial questions was removed from the board and his reputation systematically destroyed.

But it was the pattern with women that finally brought it all down. David had a practice of "discipling" young women in the church—always attractive, always vulnerable, always isolated in private counseling sessions that had no accountability or oversight. He never physically crossed a line (as far as anyone could prove), but the emotional manipulation was devastating. He would tell them they were special, that God had given him unique insight into their lives, that their relationships with boyfriends or husbands were spiritually unhealthy. Several marriages nearly broke up. At least three women had mental health crises after his "discipleship."

When it all came out, the board was shocked. "He seemed so anointed," one elder said. "His teaching was so powerful. How could someone who preached grace be so... abusive?"

THE WOUNDED HEALER

I asked the question I always ask in these situations: "Tell me about his father."

The room went quiet. Then one board member spoke up: "His dad was a pastor too. Real authoritarian type. David never talks about him except to say he was 'old school.' We always assumed that meant traditional theology."

"It means," I said gently, "that David was probably raised in a spiritually abusive home. And he's been recreating that abuse for twelve years in this church. His father wound has been driving this entire ministry."

Over the next several weeks, as the investigation unfolded and David was eventually removed from ministry, the pattern became clear. David's father had ruled his family with fear disguised as faith, control disguised as shepherding, manipulation disguised as spiritual authority. David had sworn he'd never be like his father.

And then he'd become exactly like his father.

He'd ministered from his wound. And he'd weaponized it against everyone in his path.

Across town, a worship leader named Marcus was destroying his third church in ten years. The pattern was always the same: He'd arrive with incredible gifts, build a powerful worship ministry, gather a devoted team, and create genuinely transformative worship experiences. People would have legitimate encounters with God under his leadership.

And then, slowly, it would all turn toxic.

Marcus needed to be the center of everything. The worship set wasn't about leading people to God—it was about showcasing Marcus's vocal ability. The team wasn't a community of servants—it was an audience for Marcus's gifts. Anyone who showed talent that might rival his was subtly undermined or pushed out. Women on the team were subjected to inappropriate comments and manipulation masked as "spiritual intimacy."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

When people started to question his behavior, Marcus would weaponize his testimony. He'd share tearfully from the platform about his difficult childhood, his journey of healing, his gratitude for grace. He'd position himself as the wounded healer—someone whose brokenness made him more authentic, more real, more able to connect with broken people.

But it was all a manipulation. Marcus was using his wound as both shield and sword—a shield to protect himself from accountability, and a sword to cut down anyone who threatened his position.

When the senior pastor finally confronted him about his treatment of the team, Marcus exploded: "You're threatened by me! You can't handle that people connect with my authenticity! I'm the one doing real ministry here while you're worried about politics and policies!"

He resigned that day, posted a dramatic farewell on social media about "religious spirits" and "Pharisees," and had a new worship position lined up within a month. The cycle would repeat.

Marcus's wound was real—deep childhood shame from a father who mocked him, a mother who abandoned him, a lifetime of feeling worthless. But instead of getting help to heal that wound, he'd built a ministry around it. He'd learned that vulnerability could be weaponized, that sharing your pain could create power, that being "real" about your brokenness could become a license for bad behavior.

His wound had become his weapon. And in three different churches, it had left a trail of casualties.

HOW WOUNDS BECOME WEAPONS

Here's what I've learned in twenty years of chaplaincy work with ministers in crisis: Unhealed wounds don't just stay internal. They don't politely stay in their lane, affecting only the person who carries them. They leak. They spread. They infect everything they touch.

And in the hands of someone with power and platform, they become weapons.

This isn't intentional. David didn't wake up planning to spiritually abuse his congregation. Marcus didn't set out to manipulate his worship teams. Neither of them looked in the mirror and said, "Today I'm going to wound people the way I was wounded."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

But that's exactly what happened. Because that's what unhealed wounds do.

Wounds become weapons through unconscious reenactment. We recreate our trauma. The pastor who was controlled becomes controlling. The leader who was shamed becomes shaming. The minister who was abandoned creates systems where people feel disposable. It's not a conscious choice—it's a psychological pattern called "repetition compulsion." We unconsciously recreate our original wounds in an attempt to master them, to finally get it right, to prove we can survive it.

But instead of healing, we just spread the infection.

Wounds become weapons through projection. We see in others what we can't face in ourselves. The pastor with unacknowledged shame sees sin everywhere and becomes hypervigilant about everyone else's moral failures. The leader with hidden doubts becomes rigid and fundamentalist, unable to tolerate any questioning. The minister who's terrified of his own anger becomes hypersensitive to any conflict, creating environments where honesty is punished and everyone walks on eggshells.

We weaponize our unhealed places against anyone who triggers them.

Wounds become weapons through triangulation. Wounded leaders create unhealthy alliances, pit people against each other, and use information as currency for control. The pastor with abandonment wounds surrounds himself with loyalists and systematically eliminates anyone who might challenge him. The worship leader with narcissistic wounds creates an inner circle of admirers while marginalizing anyone who doesn't feed his ego. The board member with trust issues leaks confidential information to create chaos and maintain power.

We use people to medicate our pain, creating toxic systems in the process.

Wounds become weapons through spiritual bypassing. We use religious language to avoid dealing with our psychological issues. The leader with unprocessed trauma says "I've forgiven" without actually doing the grief work. The pastor with mental health issues says "I just need more faith" instead of getting therapy. The minister with addiction says "grace covers it" while refusing treatment. We weaponize theology to avoid healing, and then we teach that toxic spirituality to everyone we lead.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

We turn the Gospel itself into a weapon against wholeness.

The devastating truth is this: **The more platform you have, the more damage your unhealed wounds can do.** A wounded person in the pew hurts themselves and maybe their immediate relationships. A wounded person in leadership hurts dozens, hundreds, sometimes thousands of people. The wound multiplies through the system, creating casualties at every level.

And often, the casualties don't even know they've been wounded—they just know something feels off, something hurts, something about this ministry environment doesn't feel safe.

THE CYCLE OF HURT PEOPLE HURTING PEOPLE

I need to tell you what happened in David's church after he was removed. The board assumed that once the abusive pastor was gone, things would get better. People would heal. The church would recover.

Instead, it got worse.

Because David hadn't just been the problem—he'd created a system that replicated his wounds. He'd attracted and promoted people who shared his woundedness. He'd built a culture that normalized abuse and pathologized healthy boundaries. He'd created an entire congregation of people who'd been trained to equate control with godliness, manipulation with mentoring, fear with faithfulness.

Staff members who'd been under David's leadership for years didn't know how to function without his authoritarian control. They'd been groomed to be passive, to never question, to wait for directives. Now, asked to think for themselves and collaborate as peers, they were paralyzed.

Congregants who'd thrived under David's leadership started leaving because the new interim pastor wasn't "strong enough." They missed the certainty, the vision, the sense that someone was in charge. They'd become addicted to the very dynamics that had hurt them.

The board members who'd enabled David for years were suddenly faced with their own complicity. They'd seen red flags and ignored them. They'd heard complaints and dismissed them. They'd chosen ministry success over people's wellbeing. Now they had to face what they'd been part of.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

This is the cycle: Hurt people hurt people. And hurt people create systems that hurt more people. And those hurt people go on to hurt others. Round and round it goes, generation after generation, ministry context after ministry context.

I've seen it play out hundreds of times:

The children's minister who was emotionally neglected creates a children's ministry culture where kids' emotional needs are ignored in favor of curriculum completion and behavioral management. Those kids grow up learning that church is a place where you perform, not a place where you're seen. Some of them leave the faith entirely. Others become the next generation of performance-driven ministers.

The worship leader who was shamed for his mistakes creates a worship culture where perfectionism reigns and grace is preached but never practiced. Team members burn out or develop anxiety disorders. Some quit music ministry entirely. Others internalize the toxic standards and carry them to the next church.

The senior pastor who was spiritually abused creates a church culture where questioning is equated with rebellion, where loyalty is more important than truth, where image management trumps integrity. Congregants learn to hide their struggles, fake their spiritual victories, and never bring their real selves to church. They pass this pseudo-Christianity on to their children.

Hurt people hurt people. It's not an excuse—it's an explanation. And until we break the cycle, the wounding just continues.

Galatians 6:1 (NASB) gives us the prescription: "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted."

Notice the critical phrase: "each one looking to yourself." You can't restore someone else from a place of unhealed wounding. You can't address someone else's sin when you're blind to your own. You can't break the cycle if you're still caught in it.

The only way to stop hurting people is to get healing for yourself.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

MINISTRY CASUALTIES FROM UNHEALED LEADERS

Let me introduce you to some of the casualties I've walked alongside over the years:

Sarah, who was on staff at a megachurch for eight years before having a complete psychological breakdown. Her boss—a senior pastor with unacknowledged workaholism and control issues—demanded 70-80 hour weeks, criticized her constantly, and made her feel like she was never doing enough. She developed anxiety so severe she couldn't sleep. She started having panic attacks. Eventually, she couldn't even drive past a church without feeling physically ill. She's been out of ministry for five years and is still in therapy. She says she'll never work for a church again.

Tom and Jennifer, whose marriage nearly ended after ten years of ministry under a pastor with attachment wounds. The pastor created a culture where marriages and families were openly sacrificed for "the mission." Staff members were expected to be available 24/7. Family time was seen as selfishness. Tom and Jennifer both worked at the church, rarely saw their kids, and slowly grew distant from each other. By the time they realized what was happening, they were essentially strangers living in the same house. They left the church and spent two years in intensive marriage counseling. They're together now, but Tom says, "We lost a decade with our kids that we'll never get back."

Michael, a gifted young worship leader who served under Marcus (the narcissistic worship pastor from the opening). Michael had genuine talent and a servant's heart. Under Marcus's "mentoring," he learned to compete rather than collaborate, to perform rather than worship, to use his gifts for personal validation rather than God's glory. When Michael eventually left (after Marcus had undermined him one too many times), he was so wounded and confused about worship that he didn't play his guitar for two years. "Marcus stole my joy in worship," he told me. "I associated leading worship with anxiety and performance. I had to completely relearn what it means to worship God."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

An entire youth group—thirty-seven teenagers—who were led by a youth pastor with unhealed sexual trauma. The youth pastor's boundaries were terrible. She was inappropriately physical with students, shared details of her personal life that were way too intimate, and created an environment where emotional and physical boundaries were constantly violated. Nothing illegal happened, but the damage was real. Students learned that church leaders couldn't be trusted with vulnerable information. They learned that boundaries didn't matter. They learned to sexualize spiritual relationships. Ten years later, most of those kids aren't in church anymore. The ones who are still carry wounds from that ministry.

These aren't extreme examples. These are normal casualties from normal ministry contexts where leaders operated from unhealed wounds.

And here's what breaks my heart: Most of these wounded leaders genuinely loved God. They sincerely wanted to serve. They believed they were doing good work. David preached powerful sermons. Marcus led genuinely transformative worship experiences. Sarah's boss built a church that reached thousands. The youth pastor legitimately cared about students.

But unhealed wounds don't care about good intentions. They don't care about sincere hearts or genuine giftedness. They just do what wounds do: they leak, they infect, they spread.

And people get hurt.

THE CONGREGATION AS UNWITTING THERAPIST

One of the most insidious dynamics in ministry is when leaders use their congregation as unwitting therapists—trying to get from ministry what they should be getting from actual therapy.

The pastor who needs constant affirmation structures everything around receiving praise. He fishes for compliments after sermons. He needs to hear "great message, pastor" every Sunday or he feels like a failure. He creates systems where people tell him he's wonderful, needed, irreplaceable. He's not actually shepherding—he's trying to medicate his shame by getting hundreds of people to tell him he's valuable.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The worship leader who needs to be seen makes every service about showcasing her gifts. The worship set is really a performance. The team exists to make her look good. The congregation's role is to be an appreciative audience. She's not leading worship—she's trying to heal the wound of being invisible in her family by making sure everyone sees her now.

The children's minister who needs to be needed creates dependency in the families he serves. He makes himself indispensable. He subtly undermines parents' confidence so they'll rely on him. He positions himself as the expert, the rescuer, the one who really understands their kids. He's not empowering parents—he's trying to feel valuable by being the hero he wished someone had been for him.

The counseling pastor who needs intimacy blurs boundaries with counselees. She shares too much of her own story. She lets sessions run long. She texts clients outside of appointments. She creates emotional dependency. She's not providing professional counseling—she's trying to meet her own needs for connection through her counseling relationships.

This isn't a conscious manipulation (usually). These leaders genuinely believe they're serving. But underneath the service is an unmet need, an unhealed wound, a hunger that can never be satisfied by the people they're supposed to be feeding.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw this dynamic clearly in his classic work *Life Together*: "The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community."

When we love our *dream* of what ministry will do for us—the affirmation we'll get, the needs it will meet, the wounds it will heal—we destroy the very community we're supposed to be building. Because we're not actually there for the people. We're there for what the people can do for us.

The congregation becomes our therapist. Ministry becomes our medication. And no one gets actually served—they just get used.

Here's the painful truth: **Your congregation cannot heal your childhood wounds.** Your worship team cannot fill your father-shaped void. Your counseling clients cannot meet your need for intimacy. Your staff cannot provide the family you never had.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Those are legitimate needs. But ministry is the wrong place to meet them. That's what therapy is for. That's what peer relationships are for. That's what your own spiritual community (where you're not the leader) is for. That's what honest friendship and healthy family relationships are for.

When we ask our ministry contexts to heal us, we set up everyone—ourselves and the people we serve—for failure and disappointment.

PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS MASKING PERSONAL DEVASTATION

Here's one of the cruelest ironies in ministry: You can be tremendously successful professionally while being completely devastated personally. In fact, the two often go hand in hand.

Because ministry success is measurable in ways that personal wholeness isn't. You can count attendance, track giving, measure growth, document baptisms, celebrate salvations. You can build a reputation, gain a platform, establish credibility, earn recognition. You can look incredibly successful by every external metric while dying inside.

I've known pastors who built megachurches while their marriages were collapsing. Worship leaders who led thousands in worship while battling secret addictions. Youth pastors who saw hundreds of students come to faith while their own kids wanted nothing to do with Christianity. Missionaries who reached unreached people groups while completely neglecting their own souls.

The success masked the devastation. The platform hid the pain. The ministry wins covered up the personal losses.

And often, the professional success became the excuse for the personal devastation. "I'm doing important work for God—of course it costs me something." "These people need me—I can't focus on my own issues right now." "God is blessing this ministry—that's proof I'm on the right track, even if my personal life is a mess."

But success without wholeness is not God's plan. Growth without health is not kingdom fruitfulness. Platform without character is not spiritual maturity.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Jesus never said, "Build big things for Me regardless of the cost to your soul." He said, "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26, NASB).

You can gain the whole ministry world—grow a church, build a platform, reach thousands—and lose your soul in the process. You can succeed externally while disintegrating internally. You can look alive while dying inside.

And here's what's especially dangerous: The professional success can actually prevent you from addressing the personal devastation. Because if ministry is "working"—if people are being reached, if the church is growing, if lives are being changed—it's easy to convince yourself that the cost is worth it, that the sacrifice is noble, that God is blessing your choices.

But God is not blessing your destruction. He's not asking you to destroy yourself for His kingdom. He's grieving the fact that you're using ministry success to avoid dealing with your wounds.

A.W. Tozer wrote: "It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply."

I believe Tozer was right about this—but I think we often misunderstand what he meant. He wasn't saying God deliberately wounds us or that suffering itself makes us blessed. He was saying that the wounds we carry, when properly healed and integrated, can become sources of profound ministry.

But the key word there is *healed*. God can use your wounds after they've become scars. But He's not asking you to bleed out while building a ministry.

Professional success that masks personal devastation is a house built on sand. Eventually, it collapses. The only question is when, and how much damage the collapse will cause.

WARNING SIGNS: IS YOUR WOUND DRIVING YOUR MINISTRY?

How do you know if you're ministering from unhealed wounds? Here's a practical assessment tool I've developed over years of working with ministers in crisis. Be honest as you work through these questions:

THE WOUNDED HEALER

RELATIONAL WARNING SIGNS

- **Do you struggle to maintain healthy boundaries with people you serve?** (Getting too close, sharing too much, becoming emotionally dependent)
- **Do you need to be needed?** (Feeling valuable only when people depend on you, creating dependency rather than empowerment)
- **Do you have difficulty receiving criticism or feedback?** (Feeling attacked when questioned, unable to separate identity from performance)
- **Do you lack close friendships where you're not "the pastor"?** (All relationships are either ministry-related or non-existent)
- **Do you find yourself drawn to certain types of people in ministry?** (Always "rescuing" the same kind of person, recreating familiar dynamics)

EMOTIONAL WARNING SIGNS

- **Do you feel chronically resentful?** (Angry that people need so much, bitter about ministry demands)
- **Do you struggle with disproportionate reactions?** (Small things trigger big emotional responses, overreacting to minor situations)
- **Do you feel emotionally numb or disconnected?** (Going through the motions, feeling nothing during what should be meaningful moments)
- **Do you experience anxiety or dread about ministry?** (Sunday morning panic, avoidance of ministry responsibilities, constant worry)
- **Do you swing between grandiosity and worthlessness?** (Either feeling like God's gift to ministry or like a complete fraud)

THE WOUNDED HEALER

BEHAVIORAL WARNING SIGNS

- **Are you unable to rest or take time off?** (Feeling guilty about Sabbath, working constantly, can't unplug)
- **Do you use ministry to avoid personal problems?** (Staying busy with church work to avoid dealing with marriage, family, or personal issues)
- **Do you seek validation through ministry results?** (Needing attendance numbers, positive feedback, or visible success to feel okay about yourself)
- **Do you have secret behaviors you hide from your congregation?** (Addictions, unhealthy coping mechanisms, behaviors inconsistent with your teaching)
- **Do you repeatedly experience the same conflicts in different contexts?** (Same problems with different boards, staff, congregations—the common denominator is you)

MINISTRY PATTERN WARNING SIGNS

- **Do you create cultures of control or fear?** (Staff or congregants afraid to question, disagree, or bring concerns)
- **Do you spiritualize everything to avoid dealing with practical issues?** ("We just need more prayer" instead of addressing actual problems)
- **Do you have a trail of damaged relationships behind you?** (Former staff members, congregants, or colleagues who left wounded)
- **Do you struggle to empower others or share leadership?** (Micromanaging, inability to delegate, needing to control everything)
- **Do you use your story as a shield against accountability?** ("You don't understand what I've been through" deflecting legitimate concerns)

THE WOUNDED HEALER

SPIRITUAL WARNING SIGNS

- **Is your personal relationship with God entirely connected to ministry performance?** (Can't pray outside of sermon prep, only encounter God when you're "on")
- **Do you teach what you haven't experienced?** (Preaching about grace while living under law, teaching about rest while exhausted)
- **Do you feel like a fraud spiritually?** (Deep disconnect between public image and private reality)
- **Are you afraid God will expose you?** (Sense that if people knew the truth, everything would fall apart)
- **Have you lost your "first love"?** (Ministry became a job, calling became a burden, passion became performance)

PHYSICAL WARNING SIGNS

- **Do you have chronic health problems that worsen during ministry stress?** (Migraines, digestive issues, sleep problems, chronic pain)
- **Are you self-medicating?** (Using alcohol, food, sex, shopping, or other substances/behaviors to cope)
- **Do you ignore physical warning signs?** (Pushing through illness, refusing to see doctors, denying body's distress signals)
- **Are you exhausted all the time?** (Not just tired—bone-deep depletion that doesn't improve with rest)

SCORING YOUR ASSESSMENT

0-5 boxes checked: You're likely in a relatively healthy place, but stay vigilant. All ministers carry some wounds—the question is whether you're actively addressing them.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

6-12 boxes checked: Warning signs are present. You're at risk of ministering from wounds rather than scars. Consider seeking a therapist or spiritual director to help you address what you're carrying.

13-20 boxes checked: You're in the danger zone. Your wounds are likely driving significant aspects of your ministry, and you're at risk of causing harm. Strongly consider a ministry sabbatical to focus on healing. Professional help is essential.

21+ boxes checked: You're in crisis. Your wounds are not just driving your ministry—they're destroying it and you. Immediate intervention is needed. Consider stepping back from ministry entirely while you get help. This is red-level triage.

THE PATH FORWARD

Proverbs 27:6 (NASB) offers a devastating truth: "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy."

Sometimes the most loving thing someone can do is wound us with truth. To tell us what we don't want to hear. To name what we're refusing to see. To expose the gap between our image and our reality.

If this chapter has wounded you—if you're seeing yourself in these case studies, recognizing your patterns in these warning signs, feeling exposed by this assessment—please hear this:

That wound is faithful. It's loving. It's the beginning of healing.

The deceitful kisses are the people who tell you everything is fine when it's not. The ones who celebrate your ministry success while ignoring your personal devastation. The ones who enable your unhealthy patterns because confronting them would be uncomfortable.

The faithful wound is the honest assessment that says: You're hurting people. You're using ministry to avoid healing. You're weaponizing your wounds. You need help.

I know this is hard to hear. I know it feels like condemnation. I know you're probably feeling defensive, ashamed, angry, or all three.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

But please don't dismiss this. Please don't spiritualize it away. Please don't add this chapter to the list of things you'll think about later when ministry calms down (spoiler: it never calms down).

The cost of unhealed wounding is too high. The casualties are too real. The damage is too extensive.

And you—you are worth healing. Not just so you can be a better minister, but because you are a beloved child of God who deserves wholeness. Not just so you stop hurting people, but because you deserve to stop hurting.

Your wounds don't define you. But they will destroy you if you don't address them.

And they will destroy the people you're called to serve.

So please: If you saw yourself in this chapter, let it be the faithful wound that finally breaks through your defenses. Let it be the crisis that becomes a turning point. Let it be the moment you stop performing and start healing.

The people you serve deserve a whole leader.

And you deserve to be whole.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

As you read the case studies of David and Marcus, did you recognize any of their patterns in your own ministry? What was your emotional response to that recognition? Complete the Warning Signs Assessment honestly. What did it reveal? Are you willing to share the results with someone safe who can help you respond? Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community." What is your "dream" of ministry—what do you hope it will give you or heal in you? How might that dream be driving unhealthy patterns? Can you identify specific people who have been casualties of your unhealed wounding? What would it mean to acknowledge that and make amends? In what ways might you be using your congregation as "unwitting therapists"—trying to get from ministry what you should be getting from actual therapy or healing work? Where is your professional success masking personal devastation? What would it cost you to admit that—and what will it cost you if you don't? Richard Rohr says, "If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it." Who are you transmitting your untransformed pain to? What patterns are you passing down? What faithful wound has this chapter delivered? Will you receive it as loving correction or dismiss it as condemnation? What will determine your response?

"Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy." — Proverbs 27:6 (NASB)

The truth hurts. But it's the kind of hurt that heals.

Let this be the faithful wound that breaks through your defenses and begins your journey toward wholeness.

You deserve to heal.

And the people you serve deserve a healed leader.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

PART TWO: THE HEALING JOURNEY

"Scars form when we allow light into the wound"

CHAPTER 4: Permission to Be Broken

I sat in my truck in the therapist's parking lot for twenty minutes before my first appointment, hands gripping the steering wheel, trying to convince myself to just drive away. I was fifty-one years old. I was a firefighter, a pastor, a chaplain. I'd pulled people out of burning buildings, sat with dying patients, counseled hundreds of people through their worst moments.

And I couldn't make myself walk into a counselor's office to ask for help.

The shame was crushing. I kept thinking: *What kind of pastor needs therapy? What kind of chaplain can't handle his own mental health? What kind of man falls apart like this?*

I'd been telling myself for months that I was fine. That what I was experiencing was just stress. That I'd get through it if I just prayed more, trusted God more, tried harder. I'd actually preached a sermon series on resilience two months earlier—five weeks of teaching people how to overcome adversity through faith.

Meanwhile, I was having panic attacks in my car. I couldn't sleep. I was snapping at my wife over nothing. I'd started avoiding people because the thought of one more conversation, one more need, one more crisis made me want to scream. And the worst part? I was having intrusive thoughts about driving my truck off a bridge—not because I wanted to die, exactly, but because I was so exhausted I just wanted everything to stop.

I knew I needed help. But admitting it felt like admitting I'd failed. At everything. As a minister. As a man. As a Christian.

Finally, fifteen minutes late for the appointment, I got out of the truck and walked to the door. My hands were shaking as I filled out the intake forms. When the therapist—a kind woman in her sixties—called me back to her office, I sat down on her couch and the first words out of my mouth were: "I don't know if I'm supposed to be here."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

She smiled gently. "Why not?"

And I said what I'd been thinking: "Because I'm the one who's supposed to have it together. I'm the one who helps other people. I'm the pastor. I'm the chaplain. I'm supposed to be strong."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said something that broke me open: "Jeff, you're not here because you're weak. You're here because you're finally being honest. That takes more strength than pretending does."

I started crying. Not the dignified, single-tear kind of crying. The ugly, shaking, can't-breathe kind. Fifty-one years of holding it together came apart in that counselor's office.

And for the first time in my adult life, I gave myself permission to be broken.

THE RAGAMUFFIN'S CONFESSION

Brennan Manning gave us the language of "ragamuffin" to describe those of us who've stopped pretending we have it all together. In his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, he wrote about the freedom that comes when we finally accept that we're broken, messy, in-process people who are desperately dependent on grace.

Manning wrote: "In every dimension of our existence we are on a journey from shadow to substance, from illusion to reality, from the impostor to the beloved."

The impostor is the version of ourselves we present to the world—the put-together pastor, the anointed leader, the spiritual authority who's conquered sin and suffering. The impostor preaches about victory while hiding defeat. The impostor counsels others while refusing to be counseled. The impostor projects strength while dying of weakness inside.

The beloved is who we actually are—broken, human, in desperate need of grace, loved by God not because we're impressive but because we're His. The beloved doesn't have to pretend. The beloved can be honest about struggle. The beloved can ask for help without shame.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The journey from impostor to beloved requires confession. Not the sanitized, performative confession where we share acceptable struggles while hiding the real ones. Real confession. Honest acknowledgment of our brokenness.

Here's my ragamuffin confession:

I'm a recovering performance addict who built my entire identity on being the strong one, the helper, the guy who could handle anything. I learned early that love was something you earned through usefulness and achievement. So I became useful. I became competent. I became indispensable.

And I almost destroyed myself in the process.

I have father wounds so deep that I'm fifty-seven years old and I still struggle with the voice in my head that says I'm not good enough. I've built entire ministries trying to prove that voice wrong.

I have ministry wounds from boards that betrayed me, denominations that used me, and churches that chewed me up and spit me out. I carry scars from those battles that still ache in certain weather.

I've failed as a father in ways that haunt me. I've prioritized ministry over my daughters and damaged those relationships in ways I'm still trying to repair. The guilt of that keeps me up at night.

I've battled depression for years. Some days getting out of bed takes everything I have. I've been on medication. I've been in therapy. I've had seasons where I couldn't feel God at all and wondered if any of this was real.

I'm a recovering codependent who still struggles with boundaries, with saying no, with believing my worth isn't tied to how many people need me.

I'm a work in progress. I'm in process. I'm broken.

And I'm learning—slowly, painfully—that this doesn't disqualify me from ministry. It actually qualifies me for a different, more authentic kind of service.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

But it required giving myself permission to be broken. Permission to need help. Permission to be human.

That permission didn't come naturally. I had to fight for it. I had to dismantle years of conditioning that told me strong men don't ask for help, good Christians don't need therapy, real ministers have it all together.

I had to learn that the superhero complex isn't faithfulness—it's idolatry.

DISMANTLING THE SUPERHERO COMPLEX

The superhero complex in ministry goes something like this: You're called to be God's representative, spiritual authority, the person with answers. You're supposed to model victorious Christian living. You're supposed to have conquered temptation, mastered spiritual disciplines, achieved a level of maturity that makes you reliable and trustworthy.

In other words, you're supposed to be more than human.

This complex is built on several lies:

Lie #1: Spiritual maturity means not struggling. Truth: Spiritual maturity means being honest about your struggles while continuing to seek God through them.

Lie #2: Leaders must have it all together. Truth: Leaders must be in process toward wholeness while being honest about where they actually are in that process.

Lie #3: Asking for help is weakness. Truth: Refusing to ask for help when you need it is foolishness masquerading as strength.

Lie #4: Your value comes from your competence. Truth: Your value comes from being God's beloved child, regardless of how well you perform.

Lie #5: People need you to be strong. Truth: People need you to be real. They need to see that faith works in actual human lives, not just in superhero fantasies.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The superhero complex is attractive because it makes us feel safe. If I can just be strong enough, competent enough, spiritual enough—then I won't be vulnerable. I won't need help. I won't be at risk of failure or exposure or rejection.

But it's a lie. A dangerous, destructive lie.

Because you're not a superhero. You're a human being. And human beings are fragile. We break. We need help. We struggle. We fail. We get tired. We need rescue.

The superhero complex doesn't make you strong—it makes you isolated. It doesn't protect you—it imprisons you. It doesn't serve people—it sets them up for disappointment when they discover you're human after all.

Henri Nouwen understood this deeply. He wrote: "Our brokenness is truly ours. Nobody can take it away from us or remove it. It is to our own woundedness that we have to go, and with our own suffering that we have to embrace our brokenness."

Notice what Nouwen doesn't say. He doesn't say we need to fix our brokenness, overcome it, or transcend it. He says we need to *go to it*, to *embrace it*.

This is radically different from the superhero complex, which says we need to hide our brokenness, deny it, pretend it doesn't exist.

Nouwen is saying: Your brokenness is real. It's yours. It's part of your story. And trying to pretend it's not there doesn't make you strong—it makes you dishonest.

Dismantling the superhero complex means accepting that you're not supposed to be invulnerable. You're supposed to be authentic. You're not supposed to have conquered all struggle. You're supposed to be honest about the struggle you're in. You're not supposed to be everyone's savior. That job is already taken.

You're just supposed to be human. Beautifully, messily, honestly human. A human who knows God, who's being transformed by grace, who's in process toward wholeness—but still human.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

That's not a lesser thing. That's actually the whole point.

THE THEOLOGY OF WEAKNESS AND STRENGTH

The Apostle Paul had a problem. He called it a "thorn in the flesh"—we don't know exactly what it was, but it was significant enough that he begged God three times to remove it (2 Corinthians 12:7-8).

God said no.

And then God said something that turns the superhero complex completely upside down:

"And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:9-10, NASB)

Read that again. Slowly.

Power is perfected in weakness. Not despite weakness. Not after weakness is overcome. *In* weakness.

Paul doesn't say, "I asked God to remove my weakness, and He made me strong." He says, "I asked God to remove my weakness, and He said My grace is sufficient, My power works best in your weakness."

This is a completely different paradigm than the superhero complex. The superhero complex says: Overcome your weakness so God can use you. Paul says: God's power is most visible *through* your weakness.

The superhero complex says: Hide your struggles so people will respect your ministry. Paul says: I'll boast about my weaknesses so people can see Christ's power in me.

The superhero complex says: Get yourself together so you can serve God effectively. Paul says: My effectiveness comes not from my strength but from my willingness to be weak enough for God's strength to show through.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

This is the theology of weakness and strength: **God's power is not hindered by your weakness—it's showcased by it.**

Think about it: If you're strong, capable, competent, and together—when good things happen in your ministry, who gets the credit? You do. People look at you and think, "Well, of course his ministry is effective. He's gifted, educated, charismatic, organized."

But if you're weak, broken, struggling, barely holding on—and God still works powerfully through you—there's only one explanation: God.

Your weakness doesn't limit God's power. Your weakness *reveals* God's power. Because when something beautiful and transformative happens through someone who's obviously inadequate for the task, everyone knows it's not human capability at work—it's divine grace.

This doesn't mean we pursue weakness or celebrate brokenness for its own sake. It means we stop pretending we're not weak and broken. It means we stop hiding our humanity behind performance. It means we stop trying to be superhuman and start being honestly human—trusting that God works powerfully through honest humanity.

James understood this too. That's why he wrote: "*Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed*" (James 5:16, NASB).

Confession precedes healing. Not hiding. Not performing. Not pretending. Confession—honest acknowledgment of our brokenness, our struggles, our sins, our weaknesses.

Confess to *one another*. Not just to God in private prayer, but to actual human beings. To safe people who can pray with you, walk with you, hold you accountable, and remind you that you're not alone.

The pathway to healing runs straight through vulnerability.

CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR MINISTER VULNERABILITY

Here's the problem: Most ministry cultures are not safe places for leader vulnerability.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

I learned this the hard way. Early in my pastoral ministry, I tried being honest about my struggles. I shared from the pulpit about my battle with depression. I talked in staff meetings about my therapy appointments. I was transparent with the board about my limitations and areas where I needed help.

Some people responded beautifully. They appreciated the honesty. They felt like they could be honest too. It created genuine community.

But others? They lost confidence in my leadership. They questioned whether I should be pastoring if I was struggling. They started looking for someone "stronger," someone "more spiritual," someone who had it all together.

And the board started getting nervous. Not because they didn't care about me personally, but because they were worried about how my vulnerability would affect the church's reputation, growth, and stability.

I eventually learned to be more careful—to discern who was safe and who wasn't, to understand the difference between appropriate transparency and oversharing, to recognize that not all vulnerability is wise or helpful.

But the deeper lesson was this: **We have to create safe spaces for minister vulnerability, because they don't exist naturally in most ministry contexts.**

What makes a space safe for vulnerability?

Confidentiality. You need to know that what you share won't become gossip, won't be used against you, won't end up as sermon illustrations without your permission.

Non-judgment. You need people who can hear about your struggles without immediately trying to fix you, shame you, or spiritualize your pain away.

Mutuality. The safest relationships are ones where vulnerability flows both directions—where you're not the only one sharing struggles, where everyone understands we're all in process.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Boundaries. Safe spaces have clear boundaries about what's appropriate, what's helpful, and what the limits of the relationship are. Your therapist is not your friend. Your spiritual director is not your counselor. Your accountability partner is not your therapist. Different relationships serve different purposes.

Competence. For some struggles, you need professional help—trained therapists, specialized counselors, psychiatric care. Your small group can't treat your clinical depression. Your accountability partner can't heal your childhood trauma. Knowing when you need professional intervention is crucial.

For most ministers, creating safe space for vulnerability means going outside your ministry context. You can't be fully vulnerable with your congregation—they need you to be their pastor, not their peer. You can't be completely transparent with your board—they're responsible for evaluating your performance. You can't share everything with your staff—you're their leader, and they need appropriate professional boundaries.

So where do you go?

A therapist or counselor who has no connection to your ministry context, who's trained in trauma-informed care, who can help you process your wounds professionally.

A spiritual director who's not from your denomination or church, who can guide your spiritual formation without an agenda about your ministry effectiveness.

A peer group of other ministers where you can be honest about the unique pressures of ministry, where there's mutual understanding and support. Many denominations have clergy peer groups. If yours doesn't, create one.

Trusted friends outside of ministry who know you as a person, not as a role—people who don't need you to be the pastor, who can just let you be human.

Your own spiritual community where you're not the leader—a church you attend where you're not on staff, where you can receive ministry instead of giving it, where you can be fed instead of feeding everyone else.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

I have all of these in my life now, and it's made the difference between surviving and thriving in ministry. But it took years to build these relationships, to find safe people, to learn what I needed and where to get it.

And it required giving myself permission to need these things in the first place.

THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND THERAPY

Let me be clear about something: Spiritual direction and therapy are not the same thing, but many ministers need both.

Therapy addresses psychological wounding, mental health concerns, trauma, and behavioral patterns. A good therapist helps you understand your family of origin issues, process traumatic experiences, develop healthier coping mechanisms, and address clinical concerns like depression, anxiety, or PTSD. Therapy is healthcare for your mental and emotional wellbeing.

Spiritual direction addresses your relationship with God, your spiritual formation, your vocational discernment, and the movements of your soul. A good spiritual director helps you notice where God is at work in your life, process your spiritual experiences, navigate seasons of darkness or dryness, and attend to your soul's health. Spiritual direction is care for your relationship with the Divine.

Both are essential. And neither is a luxury.

I've been in therapy on and off for fifteen years. Currently, I see a therapist every other week to work on my codependency patterns, my father wounds, and my ongoing recovery from ministry trauma. This isn't because I'm broken beyond repair—it's because I'm human, I carry wounds, and I need professional help to heal them well.

I also meet with a spiritual director monthly to process my prayer life, work through theological questions, discern God's leading in my various ministries, and attend to the state of my soul. This isn't because I'm spiritually immature—it's because I'm in a unique vocational position that requires intentional spiritual care.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Here's what I've learned about both:

Therapy taught me:

- My childhood shaped me in ways I didn't realize
- My patterns make sense when you understand my history
- Healing is possible but it takes work and time
- Mental health struggles are not spiritual failures
- Professional help is not a sign of weakness
- Medication can be a gift of grace
- My brain and body carry trauma that prayer alone can't heal
- Understanding myself helps me stop hurting others

Spiritual direction taught me:

- God is present even when I can't feel Him
- Dryness and darkness are normal parts of spiritual life
- My struggles don't disqualify me from God's love
- Sometimes God is silent because He's teaching me to listen differently
- My vocation is bigger than my job description
- Soul care is not selfish—it's essential
- Discernment requires attention, not just decision-making
- God is more interested in who I'm becoming than what I'm accomplishing

Neither my therapist nor my spiritual director is trying to "fix" me. Both are helping me become more whole, more integrated, more authentically myself.

And both relationships have been essential to my ability to stay in ministry without destroying myself or others.

Here's what I tell other ministers: **If you're not in therapy and you're not seeing a spiritual director, you're playing Russian roulette with your mental health, your spiritual life, and your ministry.**

THE WOUNDED HEALER

You wouldn't skip going to the doctor if you had a physical health concern. You wouldn't refuse to see a dentist if you had a toothache. You wouldn't avoid getting your car serviced if the engine was making strange noises.

Why would you refuse professional care for your mental health and spiritual formation?

The most common reasons I hear:

"I can't afford it." Many therapists offer sliding scale fees. Many denominations have funds for minister counseling. Many insurance plans cover mental health care. If you can afford cable TV and coffee shop drinks, you can prioritize therapy.

"I don't have time." You'll make time for a heart attack. You'll make time for a nervous breakdown. Proactive care is more efficient than crisis intervention. Schedule it like you would any other essential appointment.

"I should be able to handle this on my own." Says who? Why? What makes you different from every other human being who needs help sometimes?

"It's not that bad yet." When is it bad enough? When you're suicidal? When your marriage is over? When you've hurt enough people that you can't ignore it anymore? Don't wait for crisis. Get help now.

"People will think I'm weak." The people who matter will respect you for being honest. The people who judge you for getting help have their own issues with vulnerability.

"I just need to pray more." Prayer is essential. But God gave us therapists and doctors and medicine and professional care as gifts. Refusing help while claiming to trust God is not faith—it's presumption.

The brutal truth is this: **You can either get help proactively or get help reactively—after you've blown up your ministry, destroyed your relationships, or hurt yourself or others.**

I chose reactive. I waited until I was in crisis. I wish I'd chosen proactive.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Don't make my mistake.

WHY HEALING ISN'T WEAKNESS—IT'S WISDOM

I need to address something directly: The lie that seeking healing is a sign of weakness.

This lie is pervasive in ministry culture. It shows up in subtle ways:

"Real faith doesn't need therapy." "Strong Christians can handle suffering without help." "If you were truly trusting God, you wouldn't need medication." "Spiritual maturity means overcoming weakness, not giving in to it."

All lies. Destructive, dangerous lies.

Seeking healing is not weakness—it's wisdom. Let me tell you why:

Healing is wise because it's honest. Pretending you're not wounded when you are isn't strength—it's delusion. Acknowledging you need help isn't weakness—it's self-awareness.

Healing is wise because it's humble. Admitting you can't fix yourself, that you need professional help, that you're not self-sufficient—this is humility. And God honors humility.

Healing is wise because it's preventive. Getting help before you implode is smart. Waiting until you're in crisis is foolish. Would you call someone weak for going to the doctor when they feel symptoms of illness? That's not weakness—that's wisdom.

Healing is wise because it's sustainable. You can white-knuckle your way through brokenness for a while, but it's not sustainable. Eventually, you'll break. Getting help is choosing long-term health over short-term avoidance.

Healing is wise because it's loving. When you get healing for yourself, you stop bleeding on other people. You stop weaponizing your wounds. You stop hurting people from your hurt places. Getting help isn't selfish—it's one of the most loving things you can do for the people in your life.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Healing is wise because it's biblical. James says to confess to one another so you can be healed. Paul talks about bearing one another's burdens. The entire scriptural narrative is full of broken people who needed help, who cried out to God, who couldn't save themselves.

The only people in Scripture who refused help were the Pharisees—the religious leaders who thought they had it all together, who looked down on anyone who admitted need, who prided themselves on their spiritual superiority.

Jesus didn't have much patience for them. But the broken, the needy, the desperate, the ones who knew they needed help? He called them blessed.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:3-4, NASB).

The kingdom belongs to the ones who know they're spiritually bankrupt. Comfort comes to the ones who are honest about their grief.

Refusing help when you need it isn't strength—it's pride. And pride is the one thing that will absolutely prevent you from experiencing God's grace.

Getting help is wisdom. It's humility. It's faithfulness.

And it might save your life, your ministry, and the people you love.

WRITING YOUR BROKENNESS INVENTORY

I'm going to ask you to do something difficult but necessary: Write your brokenness inventory.

This isn't a confessional for public consumption. This is for you—an honest assessment of what you're actually carrying, what wounds you have, what help you need.

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Take some time with this. Find a quiet place. Be ruthlessly honest. This document is for your eyes only (and eventually for your therapist or spiritual director), so you don't need to perform or minimize or spiritualize.

Part One: Name Your Wounds

Write about each category from Chapter 2:

Childhood trauma and family of origin:

- What happened in your childhood that still affects you today?
- What needs weren't met?
- What lessons did you learn about love, worth, safety?
- How does this show up in your ministry today?

Ministry betrayal and church hurt:

- Where have you been wounded by church contexts?
- What has been done to you in the name of God?
- Who betrayed your trust?
- How has this affected your ability to trust or serve?

Moral failures and shame:

- Where have you failed?
- Who have you hurt?
- What are you ashamed of?
- What secrets are you carrying?

Burnout and compassion fatigue:

- How depleted are you?
- What are the symptoms you're experiencing?
- When did it start?
- What's driving the depletion?

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Relational fractures:

- What relationships have been damaged by your ministry?
- Who have you hurt through your choices?
- Where do you need to make amends?
- What patterns keep repeating?

Theological deconstruction:

- What are you questioning?
- What certainties have you lost?
- Where is God silent or absent?
- What don't you believe anymore?

Part Two: Assess the Urgency

Go back through what you wrote. Using the triage system:

RED (immediate crisis):

- Are you suicidal or self-harming?
- Are you actively addicted?
- Are you hurting others?
- Are you in complete burnout?

YELLOW (serious but stable):

- Are these wounds causing significant dysfunction?
- Are they affecting your ministry effectiveness?
- Are they damaging your relationships?
- Are they getting worse over time?

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GREEN (painful but manageable):

- Are these old wounds that are mostly healed?
- Are they present but not currently causing major problems?
- Do they just need ongoing maintenance?

Part Three: Identify What Help You Need

Based on your inventory, what help do you need?

- Therapy (what kind? trauma-focused? marriage? addiction?)
- Spiritual direction
- Medical evaluation (medication? physical health concerns?)
- Sabbatical or ministry break
- Marriage counseling
- Support group (12-step? codependency? grief?)
- Peer minister group
- Financial counseling
- Vocational coaching

Part Four: Make a Plan

This is where the work begins. For each need you identified:

1. **Research options.** Find three potential therapists, spiritual directors, or resources.
2. **Make appointments.** Actually call. Actually schedule. Don't just think about it.
3. **Tell someone.** Share this plan with one safe person who can hold you accountable.
4. **Set a timeline.** When will you make these calls? This week? Today?
5. **Remove barriers.** What's stopping you? Address those obstacles.

Part Five: Write Your Permission Statement

Finally, write yourself a permission statement. Here's mine:

"I, Jeff, give myself permission to be broken. I give myself permission to need help. I give myself permission to be human. I release myself from the requirement to be superhuman, to have it all together, to be everyone's savior. I acknowledge that I am wounded, that I need healing, and that seeking help is not weakness—it's wisdom. I commit to the healing journey, however long it takes, trusting that God's power is perfected in my weakness. I am not the impostor. I am the beloved. And that is enough."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Now write yours. Sign it. Date it. Put it somewhere you'll see it.

You have permission.

THE INVITATION TO HONESTY

Brennan Manning wrote: "In every dimension of our existence we are on a journey from shadow to substance, from illusion to reality, from the impostor to the beloved."

This chapter is an invitation to stop living in shadow and step into substance. To stop maintaining illusion and embrace reality. To let the impostor die so the beloved can live.

It's an invitation to be honest about your brokenness.

To acknowledge you need help.

To seek that help without shame.

To trust that God's grace really is sufficient, that His power really is perfected in weakness, that you really don't have to be superhuman to be used by God.

You have permission to be broken.

You have permission to need help.

You have permission to be human.

This doesn't make you weak. It makes you honest.

And honesty is the first step toward healing.

So let down the mask. Put down the burden of pretending. Stop performing strength you don't have.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Be the ragamuffin.

Embrace your brokenness.

And discover that the God who loves ragamuffins is already there, waiting to meet you in your honest humanity with His transforming grace.

The journey from wound to scar begins here—with permission to be broken and the courage to seek healing.

Welcome to the journey.

You don't have to do it alone.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What keeps you from giving yourself permission to be broken? What would it cost you to admit you need help? What will it cost you if you don't? Where do you see the superhero complex operating in your life? How has it served you? How has it imprisoned you? What would change if you dismantled it? Read 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 again slowly. What does it mean that God's power is perfected in weakness? How does this challenge your ideas about ministry effectiveness? Complete the brokenness inventory exercise. What did you discover? Were there wounds you'd been minimizing? Areas where you need more urgent help than you realized? Who are the safe people in your life right now—people you could be truly vulnerable with? If you don't have those relationships, what would it take to develop them? What's your biggest barrier to seeking therapy or spiritual direction? Is that barrier legitimate or is it resistance to healing? What would need to change for you to take that step? Brennan Manning talks about the journey from "impostor to beloved." Describe your impostor—the version of yourself you present to the world. Then describe your beloved—who you actually are underneath the performance. What would it take to let the beloved live? Write your permission statement. What do you need to give yourself permission to be, to need, to acknowledge? Sign it. Date it. Will you honor it?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

"And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." — 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (NASB)

You have permission.

To be weak. To be broken. To need help. To be human.

God's grace is sufficient.

His power is perfected in your weakness.

You don't have to be superhuman.

You just have to be honest.

The healing journey begins with permission.

You have it now.

What will you do with it?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 5: Sitting in the Ash Heap

Job sat in the ashes, scraping his sores with a piece of broken pottery. Everything was gone. His children—all ten of them, killed when a house collapsed during a feast. His wealth—thousands of animals, gone in a series of catastrophic raids and disasters. His health—covered in painful boils from head to foot, his body a landscape of suffering.

And now his friends had arrived. When they first saw him from a distance, they didn't recognize him. The suffering had transformed him so completely that he was unrecognizable. They tore their robes, threw dust on their heads, and then—and this is crucial—"they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great" (Job 2:11-13, NASB).

Seven days. Seven nights. Sitting in silence. Sitting in the ashes. Not trying to fix it. Not offering explanations. Not rushing to comfort or counsel or correct. Just sitting. Bearing witness to unbearable pain.

It's one of the most beautiful moments in the entire book of Job. Because for seven days, Job's friends got it exactly right. They understood that some pain is so profound that the only appropriate response is presence. Silent, solid, witnessing presence.

The tragedy is that they didn't stay there. Eventually, they opened their mouths. They started offering explanations, theological justifications, accusations disguised as counsel. They tried to make sense of Job's suffering, to fit it into their theological framework, to give him answers when what he needed was accompaniment.

But for seven days, they understood something essential about grief and healing: **Sometimes you have to sit in the ash heap before you can rise from it.**

Sometimes healing begins not with answers, not with action, not with fixing—but with honest acknowledgment of how bad things actually are.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Sometimes the most faithful thing you can do is sit in the ashes and scrape your sores with broken pottery.

I learned this the hard way.

Three years into church planting, I hit a wall. Not a metaphorical wall—an actual, complete, couldn't-go-any-further wall. I'd been working two jobs, pastoring a struggling church, dealing with my unacknowledged depression, managing constant conflict with my board, and watching my marriage slowly disintegrate.

And I just stopped functioning.

I couldn't get out of bed. I couldn't pray. I couldn't preach. I couldn't do anything except lie there and stare at the ceiling, feeling the crushing weight of failure and exhaustion and despair.

My first response was to try to fix it quickly. I took a week off. I read some books about burnout. I made lists of changes I needed to make. I came up with a plan to get back on track.

And none of it worked. Because I wasn't just tired—I was broken. And broken things can't be fixed with a quick tune-up and an oil change.

But I didn't know how to just be broken. I didn't know how to sit in the ash heap. My entire life had been built on fixing problems, taking action, being productive, moving forward. The idea of just sitting with my pain, of not doing anything to make it better—it felt like giving up.

So I kept trying to skip past the grief to the healing. I kept trying to resurrect myself before I'd actually died to what needed to die. I kept spiritualizing my pain instead of honestly feeling it.

And I stayed stuck.

It wasn't until my therapist finally said, "Jeff, you need to stop trying to fix this and just let yourself feel how bad it actually is"—it wasn't until then that anything started to shift.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

She gave me permission to sit in the ash heap. To acknowledge that I was in crisis, that my ministry was failing, that my mental health was shattered, that my relationships were damaged, that I had no idea how to fix any of it.

She gave me permission to lament.

And that's where healing actually began—in the ashes, with broken pottery, in honest acknowledgment of my brokenness.

THE NECESSARY DESCENT INTO HONEST GRIEF

Here's what our culture—and especially our Christian culture—doesn't understand: **Healing requires descent before it permits ascent.**

We want to skip straight to resurrection. We want to go from problem to solution, from crisis to recovery, from pain to healing, without the messy middle part where you actually have to acknowledge how bad things are and feel the full weight of it.

But that's not how healing works. Not in nature. Not in the human body. Not in the human soul.

When you have surgery, there's a recovery period. The incision has to heal from the inside out. If the surface skin heals too quickly while there's still damage underneath, you end up with an abscess—an infection trapped beneath healed-looking tissue. The wound has to stay open long enough for deep healing to occur.

When you break a bone, the doctors often have to re-break it if it healed wrong the first time. They have to create more damage, more pain, in order to set it correctly so it can heal properly. Healing sometimes requires going backward, descending into more pain, before you can move forward.

When someone you love dies, there's no shortcut through grief. You have to descend into it. You have to feel the loss, sit with the emptiness, acknowledge the reality of absence. Rushing past the grief doesn't make you heal faster—it just means you'll carry unprocessed pain that will surface later in unhealthy ways.

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The same is true for the wounds ministers carry.

You cannot heal childhood trauma by pretending it didn't affect you. You have to descend into the actual experience of what happened, feel the emotions you couldn't feel as a child, grieve what you didn't get, acknowledge how it shaped you.

You cannot heal from ministry betrayal by simply "forgiving and moving on." You have to descend into the actual experience of betrayal, feel the anger and hurt, acknowledge the damage it caused, sit with the reality that people who represented God wounded you in His name.

You cannot heal from moral failure by quickly confessing and resuming ministry. You have to descend into the actual weight of what you've done, feel the grief of consequences, sit in the ashes of destroyed trust, acknowledge the full scope of harm you've caused.

You cannot heal from burnout by taking a vacation. You have to descend into the actual exhaustion, stop the compulsive doing, sit with the emptiness underneath all the activity, acknowledge how depleted you actually are.

You cannot heal from relational fractures by apologizing and expecting immediate reconciliation. You have to descend into the actual damage you've done to relationships, feel the grief of what's been lost, sit with the reality that some relationships may never be restored.

You cannot heal from theological deconstruction by finding quick answers. You have to descend into the actual uncertainty, sit with the questions, feel the discomfort of not knowing, acknowledge that your old frameworks no longer hold.

The descent is necessary. There are no shortcuts. There is no express lane through the ash heap.

And this is where most of us get stuck. Because descent feels like failure. It feels like we're going backward instead of forward. It feels like giving up instead of pressing on. It feels like weakness instead of strength.

But Fleming Rutledge gets it exactly right: "The worst thing is to pretend that the bad things haven't happened."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The worst thing isn't the suffering itself—it's the pretending. It's the performance that says "I'm fine" when you're not. It's the spiritual bypassing that says "God's got this" when you're actually drowning. It's the premature resurrection that says "I'm healed" when you're still bleeding.

The necessary descent into honest grief means stopping the pretending. It means sitting in the ashes and admitting: This is bad. This hurts. I'm not okay. I don't know how to fix this. I can't skip past this pain to get to the healing.

It means scraping your sores with broken pottery and acknowledging that everything is broken—you, your ministry, your understanding of God, your sense of self, your relationships, your hope.

It means staying in the ash heap long enough to actually be there, to feel it, to grieve it, to acknowledge it.

Because you cannot heal what you will not honestly acknowledge. And acknowledgment requires descent.

WHY WE MUST RESIST PREMATURE RESURRECTION

I once sat with a pastor who'd been fired from his church. The termination was brutal—he was given two weeks' notice, no severance, and told not to contact anyone in the congregation. His family was devastated. His reputation was damaged. His calling felt shattered.

Three weeks later, he called to tell me he'd accepted a new position at another church. "God is so good!" he said. "He's already restored what the enemy stole! This new opportunity is even better than the old one!"

I felt my stomach drop. Because I knew what was happening. He was bypassing his grief. He was rushing to resurrection before he'd actually processed the death. He was using a new ministry opportunity to avoid dealing with the trauma of what had just happened.

And I knew—based on years of watching this pattern—that the unprocessed pain would show up in the new church. That the wounds he was refusing to acknowledge would leak all over his new congregation. That he was setting himself up for another crisis because he hadn't learned from this one.

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Six months later, he was in my office again, this time in full crisis. "I'm doing the same things at the new church that got me fired from the last one," he said. "I thought the problem was them, but it's me. And I have no idea how to stop."

This is what happens with premature resurrection. We try to skip the death, avoid the tomb, rush to Easter Sunday without going through Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

And it doesn't work. Because resurrection is real, but it comes *after* death, not instead of it. Jesus didn't avoid the cross. He went through it. He died—actually died. He was buried. He spent time in the tomb. There was a Holy Saturday when His body lay in darkness and His followers sat in grief, with no guarantee of what would come next.

The resurrection came. But it came *after* the death, not as a way to avoid it.

When we try to resurrect ourselves prematurely, we end up with several problems:

We don't actually heal—we just cover up symptoms. The pastor who took a new position without processing his firing didn't heal—he just found a new context to hide in. The wound was still there, still unhealed, still affecting his leadership.

We repeat our patterns in new contexts. Whatever led to the crisis in the first place is still operating. If you don't stop and do the work to understand what happened and what needs to change, you'll recreate the same dynamics in the next situation.

We miss what God was trying to teach us. Sometimes God allows things to fall apart because we need to learn something we can only learn in the ashes. When we rush to rebuild, we miss the lesson. We stay immature, repeating cycles instead of growing through them.

We build on faulty foundations. If you resurrect yourself before you've dealt with the underlying issues, you're building the new life on the same faulty foundation that caused the collapse in the first place. It's only a matter of time before it crumbles again.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

We lose credibility for future ministry. When you've been through real death and real resurrection, you can speak with authority about both. When you've bypassed the death part, you can only speak theoretically about resurrection—and people can tell the difference.

The resistance to premature resurrection is not passive. It's active. It requires choosing to stay in the difficult place, to not rush to comfort, to not grab for quick fixes or easy answers.

It requires what the spiritual tradition calls "sitting in the tomb"—the Holy Saturday experience of being between death and resurrection, with no guarantee of what comes next, in a place that feels like ending rather than beginning.

This is one of the hardest spiritual practices I know. Because every fiber of our being wants to escape pain, to fix problems, to move forward, to make it better.

But sometimes the most faithful thing we can do is stay in the pain long enough to let it do its work in us.

THE DANGERS OF SPIRITUAL BYPASSING

"God has a plan for this." "Everything happens for a reason." "Romans 8:28—all things work together for good." "Just trust God." "Praise Him in the storm!" "Your suffering is making you more like Jesus."

These are examples of spiritual bypassing—using religious language and concepts to avoid dealing with painful emotions, difficult realities, or honest questions.

Spiritual bypassing is incredibly common in Christian culture. And it's devastating to people who are actually suffering.

When someone tells me their child died and I immediately respond with "God needed another angel in heaven," I'm bypassing their grief. I'm using theology to shut down their pain, to make myself more comfortable, to avoid sitting with the unbearable reality of a parent's loss.

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When someone tells me they're depressed and I say "You just need to pray more and trust God," I'm bypassing their actual mental health condition. I'm spiritualizing a clinical issue, creating shame around getting professional help, and implying that their depression is a spiritual failure.

When someone tells me they've been wounded by the church and I respond with "Forgive and move on —bitterness will destroy you," I'm bypassing their legitimate grief and anger. I'm rushing them to a destination they're not ready for, using the language of forgiveness to avoid acknowledging how real the hurt is.

Spiritual bypassing takes many forms:

Toxic positivity: "Just focus on the blessings! Count your joys!" (When you're actively suffering, this feels dismissive and cruel.)

Premature forgiveness: "You need to forgive them." (Before you've processed the hurt, acknowledged the damage, or even felt the anger.)

Theological explanations: "God allowed this to teach you something." (Which turns God into a cosmic sadist and your suffering into a lesson plan.)

Comparative minimization: "Other people have it worse." (Which doesn't actually help and just adds shame to suffering.)

Prosperity gospel: "If you had more faith, you'd be healed/successful/blessed." (Which makes suffering your fault and God's blessing contingent on performance.)

Spiritual warfare reframing: "This is just the enemy attacking you because you're so effective." (Which can be true but can also be a way to avoid addressing real problems.)

Scripture as silencing: Quoting Bible verses to shut down honest questions, difficult emotions, or legitimate complaints.

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The problem with spiritual bypassing is that it uses true things to avoid dealing with real things. Yes, God has a plan. Yes, He works all things together for good. Yes, forgiveness is important. Yes, we're called to trust God.

But when these truths are used to avoid sitting in the ash heap, they become weapons that wound rather than balms that heal.

Walter Brueggemann understands this better than almost anyone. He writes: "The lament psalms are acts of relentless hope that refuse to settle for the way things are."

Read that again. Lament is not the opposite of hope. Lament is *an act of hope*—hope that refuses to pretend everything is okay when it's not, hope that insists God can handle our honest questions and raw emotions, hope that believes transformation is possible but won't bypass the pain to get there.

The Psalms are full of lament—roughly one-third of the Psalter is lament. And Psalm 88 is the darkest of them all. It ends with no resolution, no comfort, no turn toward praise. It ends in darkness: "You have removed lover and friend far from me; my acquaintances are in darkness" (Psalm 88:18, NASB).

That's it. That's how it ends. In darkness. In isolation. In unresolved pain.

And it's in the Bible. It's Scripture. It's God's Word.

Which means God is okay with unresolved lament. He's okay with us sitting in the ash heap, scraping our sores, crying out in pain without immediately moving to "but God is good anyway."

God is good. That's true. But you don't have to tack "but God is good anyway" onto the end of every expression of pain. Sometimes you just get to say: This hurts. This is terrible. I don't understand. I'm angry. I feel abandoned.

And God doesn't strike you with lightning. He sits in the ashes with you.

Spiritual bypassing tries to skip the lament and go straight to praise. It tries to avoid the darkness and manufacture light. It tries to perform resurrection without experiencing death.

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And it prevents real healing. Because you cannot heal what you will not honestly acknowledge. And you cannot honestly acknowledge pain while simultaneously spiritualizing it away.

SITTING WITH WHAT IS BEFORE RUSHING TO WHAT SHOULD BE

When I finally stopped trying to fix my burnout and just let myself be broken, I had to learn a completely new skill: sitting with what is.

I'm a fixer. A doer. A problem-solver. Give me a crisis and I'll create an action plan. Give me a problem and I'll develop a solution. Give me brokenness and I'll immediately start working on repair.

But when I was in the ash heap, none of that worked. Because the problem wasn't something I could fix with more effort. The problem was me—my patterns, my woundedness, my compulsive doing, my inability to just be.

My therapist gave me an assignment that felt impossible: "I want you to spend fifteen minutes a day just sitting. No phone. No book. No music. No prayer even—at least not the kind where you're asking for things or working through problems. Just sit. Just be present to whatever you're feeling."

I thought it would be easy. Fifteen minutes? That's nothing.

It was excruciating.

Because when I sat still, I felt everything I'd been running from. The grief. The shame. The fear. The anger. The exhaustion. The sense of failure. The awareness of how much I'd hurt people. The crushing weight of trying to hold it all together for so long.

I wanted to do something about it. To make a plan. To fix it. To move on from it.

But the assignment was just to sit with it. To be present to what is, without trying to make it into what should be.

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This is one of the most countercultural practices I know. Our entire culture is about improvement, progress, advancement, growth. We're not comfortable with just being. We need to be doing, achieving, moving forward.

And ministry culture is even worse. We're called to transform lives, build churches, reach the lost, disciple believers, change the world. We're measured by growth, impact, results. Sitting in the ashes accomplishes nothing measurable.

Except it accomplishes everything that matters for healing.

Sitting with what is teaches you to stop running. You can't heal while you're running from your pain. You have to stop, turn around, and face what you've been avoiding.

Sitting with what is creates space for grief. Grief requires time and space. It can't be rushed. It can't be fixed. It can only be felt, processed, moved through. Sitting creates that space.

Sitting with what is builds tolerance for difficult emotions. Most of us have very low tolerance for feeling bad. We immediately try to escape discomfort. But healing requires staying present to discomfort long enough to move through it.

Sitting with what is interrupts compulsive patterns. When you stop doing and just be, you can see the patterns you've been caught in. The constant activity, the people-pleasing, the performance, the avoidance—all of it becomes visible when you sit still.

Sitting with what is creates encounter with God in the darkness. Sometimes God is most present in the silence, the emptiness, the darkness. But you'll never encounter Him there if you're constantly trying to escape those places.

This doesn't mean you never take action. This doesn't mean you stay in the ash heap forever. This doesn't mean you just accept brokenness and never seek healing.

It means you stop rushing. You stop trying to skip the hard middle part. You stop spiritualizing your pain away and instead sit with it long enough to actually feel it, acknowledge it, grieve it.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

You sit with what is before you rush to what should be.

Because what should be will come. Resurrection happens. Healing occurs. Transformation is real.

But it comes after the death, not instead of it. After the descent, not by avoiding it. After the sitting in ashes, not by refusing to get dirty.

THE MINISTRY OF PRESENCE TO YOURSELF

When Job's friends sat with him for seven days in silence, they were practicing the ministry of presence. They weren't fixing, explaining, or teaching. They were just being present to Job's pain, bearing witness to his suffering, embodying solidarity in silence.

It was beautiful. It was exactly what Job needed.

But here's what I've learned: **Most of us need to learn the ministry of presence to ourselves before we can receive it from others.**

We're so used to being harsh with ourselves, to criticizing and condemning and demanding better. We're so practiced at the internal voice that says "Stop being so weak, get it together, you're being dramatic, other people have it worse, stop feeling sorry for yourself."

We need to learn to sit with ourselves the way Job's friends (at first) sat with him. With compassion. With patience. With non-judgmental presence.

This is incredibly hard for ministers. We're trained to minister to others, not to ourselves. We're practiced at compassion for others, not for ourselves. We can sit with someone else's pain for hours, but we can barely tolerate our own discomfort for five minutes.

The ministry of presence to yourself looks like this:

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Noticing without judging. When difficult emotions arise, instead of immediately trying to fix them or push them away or shame yourself for having them, you just notice: "I'm feeling anxious right now." "I'm feeling angry." "I'm feeling ashamed." No judgment. Just noticing.

Naming without explaining. You don't have to understand why you feel what you feel or make it make sense. You just name it: "I'm sad." "I'm scared." "I'm grieving." The naming itself is healing.

Staying without escaping. When the emotion gets uncomfortable, instead of reaching for your phone, your food, your work, your anything-to-avoid-this-feeling, you stay. You sit with it. You let it be there without trying to make it go away.

Holding yourself with compassion. You talk to yourself the way you'd talk to someone you love who's suffering. Not with harsh criticism, not with "you should be over this by now," but with kindness: "This is really hard." "You're doing the best you can." "It's okay to struggle."

Giving yourself time. You don't rush the process. You don't set artificial timelines. You let healing happen at its own pace, trusting that the work is happening even when you can't see progress.

This isn't self-indulgence. This isn't weakness. This isn't wallowing.

This is the practice of treating yourself as someone worth caring for. Someone worth being present to. Someone whose pain matters.

And until you can be present to your own pain, you can't really be present to anyone else's. Because you'll be too busy avoiding your own discomfort to sit with theirs. You'll be offering them the spiritual bypassing you use on yourself. You'll be rushing them to resurrection because you can't tolerate sitting in the tomb.

The ministry of presence to yourself is what makes authentic ministry to others possible.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

WHAT I LEARNED IN THE DARKNESS

That season of sitting in the ash heap—the months when I couldn't function, couldn't minister, couldn't do anything except be broken—taught me things I could have never learned in success.

I learned that God is present in the darkness. Not just in the triumph, not just in the victory, not just in the answered prayers and miraculous breakthroughs. He's in the darkness too. In the silence. In the absence. In the not-knowing. He doesn't leave when things fall apart. He's there in the ashes.

I learned that my identity isn't my productivity. When I couldn't do anything, when I couldn't minister or achieve or accomplish, I had to face the terrifying question: Who am I if I'm not useful? And slowly, painfully, I learned: I'm still me. I'm still God's beloved. My worth isn't in what I do—it's in whose I am.

I learned that community matters more than I knew. The people who sat with me in the darkness—who didn't try to fix me or rush me or shame me, who just bore witness to my pain—they saved my life. Not figuratively. Literally. And I learned that I'd been trying to do ministry alone for too long.

I learned that my wounds were driving more of my ministry than I wanted to admit. In the stillness, when I couldn't distract myself with constant activity, I had to face how much of my ministry was about meeting my own needs rather than serving God. How much was about proving my worth rather than expressing love. How much was about my father wound rather than Father God.

I learned that lament is prayer. The angry questions, the confused complaints, the honest admissions of how bad things were—all of it was prayer. Maybe the most honest prayer I'd ever prayed. And God received it. He didn't punish my honesty. He met me in it.

I learned that healing is slower than I wanted but deeper than I expected. I wanted a quick fix. I got a slow transformation. And looking back, I'm grateful for the slowness. Because the healing that came was real, deep, lasting—not the superficial kind that looks good but doesn't hold.

I learned that resurrection is real, but you can't fake it. You can't manufacture Easter Sunday. You can't perform your way to resurrection. But if you're willing to actually die—to let what needs to die actually die—resurrection does come. Not on your timeline. Not the way you expected. But it comes.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

And here's what I didn't expect: **The ministry that came after the ash heap was better than the ministry that came before it.** More authentic. More compassionate. More grounded. Less driven by my wounds, more rooted in my scars. Less about proving my worth, more about pointing to Christ.

The descent was necessary. The darkness was purposeful. The ash heap was where I learned to be human instead of trying to be superhuman.

And the scars I carry from that season? They're my credentials now. They're what allows me to sit with other ministers in their ash heaps and say: I know. I've been there. You will survive this. But not by rushing through it—by sitting in it long enough to let it transform you.

PERMISSION TO LAMENT

So here's what I want to give you: Permission to lament.

Permission to sit in the ash heap without immediately trying to find the silver lining.

Permission to be angry at God, to question Him, to tell Him honestly how bad things are and how much it hurts.

Permission to grieve what you've lost without immediately spiritualizing it into "God's plan."

Permission to acknowledge that you're in the tomb, in the darkness, in the Holy Saturday space where there's no guarantee of resurrection.

Permission to stop performing hope you don't feel and instead express the doubt, fear, and confusion you actually experience.

This is biblical. This is faithful. This is what the Psalms model, what Job did, what Jesus Himself did when He cried out "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Lament is not the opposite of faith. Lament is faith that's honest enough to bring its whole self to God—including the parts that hurt, the parts that doubt, the parts that don't understand.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Fleming Rutledge is right: "The worst thing is to pretend that the bad things haven't happened."

So don't pretend. Sit in the ashes. Scrape your sores. Tell God how bad it actually is. Cry. Rage. Question. Grieve.

And trust that He can handle your honesty.

Trust that He's present in the darkness.

Trust that resurrection comes—but only after you've actually died to what needs to die.

Trust that the ash heap is not the end of your story, but it might be the most important chapter in it.

Sit. Be present to your pain. Resist premature resurrection. Avoid spiritual bypassing. Give yourself the ministry of presence.

And discover that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is powerful enough to resurrect you too—when the time comes, when the death is complete, when the tomb has done its work.

But for now, for today, for this season—give yourself permission to be in the ash heap.

It's holy ground.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Read Psalm 88 slowly, all the way through. It ends in darkness with no resolution. How does it feel to read Scripture that doesn't offer comfort or hope? What does it teach you about what God can handle from us? Where are you trying to rush to resurrection without fully experiencing the death? What are you trying to fix, escape, or spiritualize away instead of sitting with? Think about Job's friends sitting in silence for seven days. When was the last time you gave yourself that kind of silent, compassionate presence? What keeps you from it? Identify where you're using spiritual bypassing in your own life. What religious language or concepts do you use to avoid feeling difficult emotions or acknowledging painful realities? Walter Brueggemann says lament is "an act of relentless hope that refuses to settle for the way things are." How does this reframe lament for you? What would it look like to lament as an act of hope rather than despair? What would the ministry of presence to yourself look like this week? Can you commit to fifteen minutes a day of just sitting with whatever you're feeling, without trying to fix it? Looking at your current struggles or wounds, what needs to die before resurrection can happen? What are you trying to keep alive that actually needs to be released? Write your own lament psalm. Be completely honest—angry, confused, questioning, grieving. Don't rush to hope at the end. Just express what is. What does it feel like to pray that honestly?

"Now when Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, they came each one from his own place... they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great." — Job 2:11-13 (NASB)

Seven days. Seven nights. Sitting in silence.

Sometimes that's the most faithful thing you can do.

For yourself. For others. Before God.

Sit in the ash heap.

Scrape your sores.

Be honest about how bad it is.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

And trust that the God who meets you in the darkness is the same God who will eventually lead you to the light.

But you cannot bypass the darkness to get to the light.

You have to sit in it.

Stay there as long as you need.

The resurrection will come.

But only after the death is complete.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 6: The Community of Fellow Pilgrims

The call came at 2 AM—residential structure fire with possible entrapment. We rolled up to find a two-story house fully involved, flames shooting through the roof, neighbors screaming that an elderly man was still inside on the second floor.

I was on the first team in. We made it to the second floor bedroom through heavy smoke and heat, found the man unconscious on the floor, and got him out. But as we were exiting, part of the ceiling collapsed. A burning beam caught my shoulder and knocked me down. For a terrifying moment, I was trapped under debris, disoriented, running out of air.

Then I felt hands grabbing me. My crew. They lifted the beam, pulled me free, and got me out. I spent three days in the hospital with second-degree burns and smoke inhalation.

But here's what I remember most about that incident: It wasn't the injury. It wasn't the rescue. It was what happened in the weeks after.

The guys from my shift showed up at my house every few days. They brought food. They sat with me. They didn't make a big deal out of it—firefighters don't do feelings and processing the way therapists do. But they were there. Present. Solid.

And when I started having nightmares about being trapped under that beam, when I'd wake up in a cold sweat feeling like I couldn't breathe, when I'd have moments of panic in enclosed spaces—they noticed. And one of the older guys, a twenty-year veteran who'd seen everything, pulled me aside one day and said:

"Kid, you're not okay. And that's normal. We've all been there. But you can't just white-knuckle through this. You gotta talk to someone. And you gotta talk to us. We're your crew. We don't leave guys alone with this stuff."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

He gave me the number for a therapist who specialized in first responder trauma. He told me about the peer support group that met monthly for firefighters dealing with PTSD. He made sure I knew I wasn't alone, wasn't weak, wasn't broken beyond repair.

And then he did something that probably saved my career: He told me about his own trauma, his own therapy, his own struggle to process the things he'd seen and experienced over two decades of firefighting. He made himself vulnerable first, which gave me permission to be vulnerable too.

That's when I learned something essential: **We heal together, not alone.**

The firehouse understood this instinctively. We had each other's backs—not just in the fire, but after the fire. Not just physically, but emotionally and psychologically. We were a brotherhood, and part of that brotherhood was making sure nobody had to carry their trauma alone.

Years later, when I moved into ministry, I was shocked to discover that the church—the community that should understand this better than anyone—often operates on the exact opposite principle.

Ministers are expected to carry their burdens alone. To be strong for everyone else. To process their trauma in private. To maintain professional distance. To never let the congregation see them struggle.

We create isolation and call it leadership. We enforce emotional distance and call it appropriate boundaries. We demand that ministers be superhuman and then wonder why so many of them burn out, blow up, or quietly disappear.

The firehouse knew something the church has forgotten: **Isolation intensifies wounding. Community facilitates healing.**

You cannot heal alone. You were not designed to heal alone. God Himself said in the very beginning, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18, NASB). And if it's not good for humans to be alone in general, it's especially not good for wounded humans to be alone in their healing.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

But finding the right community—safe people, healing relationships, fellow pilgrims who can walk beside you without wounding you further—is one of the most challenging parts of the healing journey.

Because not all community is healing. Some community is toxic. Some relationships wound more than they heal. Some circles are performance stages disguised as support groups.

So let's talk about how to find your people. How to build healing circles. How to distinguish between safe and unsafe relationships. How to create the kind of community that actually facilitates transformation instead of just performing it.

WHY ISOLATION INTENSIFIES WOUNDING

When I was struggling with depression and burnout, I did what most ministers do: I isolated. I stopped returning phone calls from friends. I avoided social situations. I kept my struggles hidden from my congregation. I went through the motions of ministry while dying inside, and I made sure nobody got close enough to see it.

I told myself I was protecting people. I was maintaining professional boundaries. I was being strong. I was handling it.

But what I was actually doing was intensifying my own wounding. Because isolation does several devastating things:

Isolation distorts reality. When you're alone with your pain, with no outside perspective, your thoughts become increasingly distorted. The depression whispers lies, and there's no one there to contradict them. The shame tells you you're uniquely broken, and there's no one there to remind you that you're human. The trauma convinces you that you'll never heal, and there's no one there to offer hope.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

In community, reality-testing happens naturally. Someone says, "That's not true." Someone reminds you, "You've survived worse than this." Someone offers perspective you can't see from inside your pain.

Alone, you lose that corrective. You spiral. The lies get louder. The distortions get worse.

Isolation amplifies shame. Shame thrives in secrecy. It tells you that if anyone knew the truth about you, they'd reject you. So you hide. And the hiding makes the shame stronger. And the stronger shame gets, the more you hide. It's a vicious cycle.

Brené Brown, whose research on shame has been transformative for so many, says it simply: "Shame needs three things to grow exponentially in our lives: secrecy, silence, and judgment. The antidote is empathy, speaking shame, and connection to others."

When you bring shame into the light—when you say the shameful thing out loud to a safe person and they respond with compassion instead of judgment—shame loses its power. But you can't do that alone.

Isolation prevents perspective. When you're in the middle of crisis, you can't see your way out. You can't see the patterns. You can't see the options. You need outside perspective—people who can see what you can't, who can offer wisdom you don't have, who can remind you of truth you've forgotten.

The writer of Ecclesiastes understood this: "Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, NASB).

You will fall. That's not a question. The question is: Will there be someone there to lift you up?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Isolation enables destructive patterns. When no one knows what you're really struggling with, there's no accountability. You can continue unhealthy behaviors without anyone questioning them. You can stay stuck in toxic patterns without anyone challenging them. You can slowly destroy yourself without anyone intervening.

Isolation gives your wounds permission to fester. It gives your addictions permission to grow. It gives your destructive patterns permission to continue unchecked.

Isolation contradicts our design. God created us for relationship. We're not designed to function in isolation. We're designed to live in community, to be known and loved, to give and receive care. When we isolate, we're working against our fundamental design.

Larry Crabb writes: "We need others. We need others to love and we need to be loved by them. There is no doubt that without it, we too, like the infant left alone, would cease to grow, cease to develop, choose madness and even death."

This isn't hyperbole. Isolation literally kills people. Studies on solitary confinement show that prolonged isolation causes severe psychological damage. Studies on infant development show that babies who aren't held and connected with fail to thrive, even if their physical needs are met.

We need connection. We need community. We need people who know us and love us anyway.

And when we're wounded, we need that connection even more.

FINDING YOUR PEOPLE: THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF SUPPORT

Here's what I had to learn: Not all support is the same. Different relationships serve different purposes. You need different types of people for different aspects of your healing journey.

Trying to get all your support from one person or one type of relationship is like trying to get all your nutrition from one food. It doesn't work. You need variety. You need different kinds of support for different kinds of needs.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Let me walk you through the different types of support I've needed (and still need) for my own healing:

A THERAPIST OR COUNSELOR

This is professional help. Someone trained in psychology, trauma, mental health. Someone who can diagnose what you're dealing with, offer evidence-based treatment, and help you process your wounds in a clinical setting.

A good therapist:

- Has professional training and credentials
- Specializes in the issues you're dealing with (trauma, depression, addiction, etc.)
- Creates a safe, confidential space
- Challenges you without shaming you
- Helps you see patterns you can't see yourself
- Gives you tools and frameworks for healing
- Doesn't have any other relationship with you (not your friend, not from your church)

My therapist helped me understand my childhood trauma, my codependency patterns, my father wounds. She taught me about attachment theory, cognitive distortions, trauma responses. She gave me practical tools for managing anxiety and depression. She held space for me to process grief I'd been carrying for decades.

I couldn't have gotten that from a friend or a spiritual director. I needed professional clinical help.

A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

This is different from therapy. A spiritual director focuses specifically on your relationship with God, your spiritual formation, your vocational calling, the movements of your soul.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

A good spiritual director:

- Is trained in spiritual direction (not the same as pastoral counseling)
- Helps you notice where God is at work in your life
- Asks questions instead of giving answers
- Holds space for mystery, doubt, darkness
- Helps you discern God's leading
- Doesn't have an agenda for your life or ministry

My spiritual director helped me process my theological deconstruction, my anger at God, my sense of calling. She helped me see where God was present even when I couldn't feel Him. She asked questions that opened up my spiritual life in ways I couldn't have accessed on my own.

I couldn't have gotten that from a therapist. I needed someone trained in the spiritual dimension.

A PEER SUPPORT GROUP

This is community with people who share your specific struggle or vocation. Other ministers. Other people in recovery. Other trauma survivors. People who understand your particular challenges because they're walking a similar path.

A good peer support group:

- Is made up of people who share your experience
- Offers mutual support (everyone gives and receives)
- Maintains confidentiality
- Meets regularly (weekly or monthly)
- Has some structure (not just vent sessions)
- Includes people at different stages (some further along in healing)

I'm part of a clergy peer group that meets monthly. We share struggles unique to ministry. We understand the pressures, the isolation, the challenges that non-ministers wouldn't fully grasp. We can be honest about our doubts, our failures, our wounds without having to explain or defend ourselves.

I couldn't have gotten that understanding from people outside of ministry. I needed peers who got it.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

TRUSTED FRIENDS

These are people who know you as a person, not as a role. People who aren't your clients, your counselees, your congregation members. People who can just be friends—no agenda, no professional relationship, just companionship.

Good friends:

- Know you outside your ministry role
- Accept you as you are
- Can have fun with you (not every relationship needs to be processing trauma)
- Tell you hard truths when you need to hear them
- Celebrate your victories
- Show up in your crises

I have friends who knew me before I was a pastor, who still call me by my nickname from high school, who couldn't care less about my ministry platform. With them, I can just be Jeff—not Pastor Jeff, not Chaplain Jeff, just Jeff.

I couldn't have gotten that relief from my professional relationships. I needed friends.

A SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY WHERE YOU'RE NOT THE LEADER

This is a church or faith community where you receive instead of give, where you're in the pew instead of the pulpit, where you can be fed instead of feeding everyone else.

A good receiving community:

- Is not where you serve in a leadership capacity
- Doesn't know you primarily as a minister
- Lets you be an ordinary participant
- Feeds your soul through worship, teaching, sacrament
- Doesn't make demands on your time or gifts

THE WOUNDED HEALER

When I was planting a church, I still attended another church on my off-Sundays where nobody knew I was a pastor. I could sing without leading. I could listen to a sermon without critiquing it. I could take communion as someone being ministered to, not someone ministering.

I couldn't have gotten that rest if I only attended churches where I was the leader. I needed a place to receive.

Here's what I learned: **I need all of these.** Not one or two. All of them. They serve different purposes, meet different needs, provide different types of support.

And finding them all took time. Years, actually. But it was worth it. Because collectively, these relationships created a web of support that caught me when I fell and helped me heal in ways I never could have alone.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ACCOUNTABILITY AND COMPANIONSHIP

For years, I confused accountability with companionship. I thought they were the same thing. They're not.

Accountability is someone checking on your behavior, holding you to standards, asking hard questions about choices you're making. It's necessary. It's good. But it's limited.

Accountability asks: "Did you do what you said you'd do? Are you keeping your commitments? Are you staying clean/sober/faithful?"

Accountability is about behavior management.

Companionship is someone walking beside you in your journey, being present to your process, witnessing your struggle without trying to fix it or judge it.

Companionship says: "I'm here with you. Tell me what it's like. I'm not going anywhere."

Companionship is about relational presence.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

You need both. But you need to know the difference.

I spent years in "accountability groups" that were really just behavior monitoring. We'd meet weekly, go through our checklist of questions—"Did you look at porn this week? Did you lie to your wife? Did you have your quiet time?"—and call it community.

But it wasn't community. It was surveillance.

Real accountability includes companionship. It asks about your behavior, but it also asks about your heart. It holds you to standards, but it also holds space for your struggle. It challenges you, but it also comforts you.

And real companionship can include accountability. People who truly walk beside you in your journey will sometimes ask hard questions, challenge destructive patterns, speak truth you don't want to hear.

But the foundation is companionship—mutual presence, shared journey, being known and loved.

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NASB) captures this well: "And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

Notice the language: "stimulate one another," "encouraging one another." This is mutual. This is relational. This is about being together, not just checking up on each other.

The church I'm trying to plant—10:10 Journey—is built on this understanding. We're not creating accountability groups that feel like parole check-ins. We're creating healing circles where people can be honest about their struggles, their wounds, their doubts, and find companionship for the journey.

Because people don't need more surveillance. They need more presence.

SAFE PEOPLE VS. UNSAFE PEOPLE

This is critical: **Not all relationships are healing. Some are harmful.**

THE WOUNDED HEALER

I learned this the hard way. I shared my struggles with people I thought were safe, and they used that information against me. I was vulnerable with church boards that responded with judgment and termination. I confided in "friends" who gossiped about my struggles.

Those experiences made me want to never be vulnerable again. To never trust anyone. To go back to isolation.

But the problem wasn't vulnerability. The problem was unsafe people.

So I had to learn how to identify safe people—and how to protect myself from unsafe ones.

SAFE PEOPLE:

Maintain confidentiality. What you share stays between you. They don't gossip, don't share your story without permission, don't use your vulnerability as sermon illustration material.

Respond with empathy, not judgment. They can hear about your struggles without immediately condemning you, shaming you, or distancing themselves from you.

Can handle complexity. They don't need simple answers or neat categories. They can sit with ambiguity, mystery, unanswered questions.

Have done their own work. They've been in therapy, dealt with their own wounds, know what healing requires. They're not perfect, but they're in process.

Respect boundaries. They don't push for more information than you're ready to share. They don't try to fix you. They let you move at your own pace.

Are secure in themselves. They don't need you to be okay for them to be okay. Your struggle doesn't threaten them. Your doubts don't shake their faith.

Tell you hard truths with kindness. When necessary, they can challenge you, confront destructive patterns, speak difficult truth—but they do it with love, not condemnation.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

UNSAFE PEOPLE:

Violate confidentiality. They share your story without permission, gossip about your struggles, or use your vulnerability to make themselves look good.

Respond with judgment and shame. They make you feel worse for sharing. They condemn your struggles. They make you regret being honest.

Need simple answers. They can't tolerate complexity or ambiguity. They rush to fix you, give advice, quote Scripture at you. They're more comfortable with certainty than with sitting in your uncertainty.

Haven't done their own work. They have unaddressed wounds, unexamined beliefs, defensive reactions to anything that challenges them. They're not in therapy and don't see why anyone would need it.

Violate boundaries. They push for information you're not ready to share. They try to fix you without permission. They make your healing about their needs.

Are threatened by your struggle. Your doubts shake their faith. Your questions make them defensive. Your pain makes them uncomfortable. They need you to be okay so they can be okay.

Use "truth-telling" as a weapon. They confront in ways that feel attacking rather than loving. Their "honesty" is really judgment. Their "accountability" is really control.

THE DISCERNMENT PROCESS:

How do you know who's safe and who's not? You test the water before diving in.

Start small. Don't share your deepest wounds in the first conversation. Share something smaller and see how they respond.

Notice their reaction. Do they listen or immediately give advice? Do they sit with you or try to fix you? Do they respond with empathy or judgment?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Check for gossip. If they gossip to you about others, they'll gossip about you to others. This is a major red flag.

Notice reciprocity. Do they share their own struggles or do they only listen to yours? Healthy relationships have mutual vulnerability.

Trust your gut. If something feels off, it probably is. Don't ignore your instincts just because someone has credentials or a good reputation.

Go slow. Deep trust takes time to build. Don't rush into vulnerability with people you don't know well.

And here's what's hard but necessary: **When you discover someone is unsafe, you have to protect yourself.** That might mean:

- Ending the relationship
- Creating significant distance
- Setting much firmer boundaries
- Stopping sharing vulnerable information

This isn't unforgiveness or holding grudges. This is wisdom. This is stewardship of your own heart. This is recognizing that not everyone has earned access to your tender places.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood this: "The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community."

Some people love their dream of what you could be for them more than they love the actual you. Those people are not safe. And you don't owe them access to your healing journey.

CREATING HEALING CIRCLES, NOT PERFORMANCE STAGES

The church has become really good at creating performance stages—places where people present their best selves, their victory stories, their testimonies of triumph. We celebrate the "after" without acknowledging the "during."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

What we need are healing circles—places where people can be in process, can admit struggle, can be honest about being broken without having to perform wholeness they don't feel.

Here's what makes a healing circle different from a performance stage:

IN A HEALING CIRCLE:

Vulnerability is normalized, not celebrated. It's not a dramatic moment when someone shares a struggle—it's expected. Everyone is broken. Everyone is in process. No one is performing wholeness.

Process is valued, not just outcomes. You don't have to have arrived to participate. You don't have to have victory to share. You can be right in the middle of the mess and still belong.

Confidentiality is sacred. What's shared in the circle stays in the circle. Period. This is non-negotiable. Without confidentiality, there's no safety.

Mutual support, not hierarchy. Everyone gives and receives. There's no "expert" or "guru" or "the one who has it figured out." There might be a facilitator, but everyone is a fellow pilgrim.

Presence, not fixing. The goal isn't to solve everyone's problems. It's to be present to each other's pain, to witness each other's struggles, to offer companionship on the journey.

Honesty, not advice. You speak from your own experience, not about what others should do. "Here's what helped me" rather than "Here's what you need to do."

Space for lament, not just praise. You can express anger, doubt, confusion, despair. You don't have to tack "but God is good" onto the end of every honest statement.

ON A PERFORMANCE STAGE:

Vulnerability is celebrated as a show of strength. People share their struggles in ways that make them look good, that demonstrate how far they've come, that showcase their spiritual maturity.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Outcomes are valued, not process. You share your victory story—the struggle you overcame, the lesson you learned, the way God came through. You don't share the ongoing struggle.

Confidentiality is optional. Your story becomes the pastor's sermon illustration, the ministry's promotional material, the organization's fundraising appeal.

Hierarchy is built in. There's a leader/teacher/expert and everyone else. The leader shares wisdom; everyone else receives it. The flow is one-directional.

Fixing is the goal. Someone shares a problem; everyone rushes to offer solutions, advice, answers. The goal is to get past the struggle as quickly as possible.

Advice flows freely. People who don't know your situation tell you what you should do, how you should handle it, what worked for them so it should work for you.

Praise is expected. You can struggle, but you have to end with "but God is faithful" or "but I'm trusting Him" or "but I know He has a plan." Unresolved lament is seen as weak faith.

Here's how you can tell the difference: On a performance stage, you're constantly aware of how you're being perceived. You're managing your image. You're curating your story for maximum impact.

In a healing circle, you can just be. You can be broken, confused, angry, doubting, struggling—and it's okay. You're not performing for an audience. You're being present with fellow pilgrims.

PRACTICAL ASSESSMENT: IS THIS RELATIONSHIP/GROUP SAFE FOR HEALING?

Use this assessment to evaluate whether a relationship or group is likely to be healing or harmful:

CONFIDENTIALITY:

- Is confidentiality explicitly stated and honored? Have you heard gossip about others' struggles shared in this context? Do people ask permission before sharing others' stories? Is information kept within the relationship/group or does it leak?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Red flags: Gossip, stories shared without permission, information spreading, no clear confidentiality agreement.

EMOTIONAL SAFETY:

- Can you share struggles without immediate judgment? Do people respond with empathy or with shame/condemnation? Can you express doubt, anger, or confusion without being spiritually corrected? Do you feel accepted as you are or pressured to be different?

Red flags: Judgment, spiritual bypassing, immediate advice-giving, pressure to perform wholeness.

MUTUALITY:

- Do multiple people share vulnerably or is it one-directional? Is there reciprocal support or do some people only give/only receive? Are all voices valued or do some dominate? Can you both give and receive in this relationship/group?

Red flags: One person dominates, no reciprocity, power imbalance that isn't acknowledged.

RESPECT FOR PROCESS:

- Is your pace of healing respected or rushed? Can you be "in process" without pressure to have arrived? Are setbacks met with compassion or disappointment? Is complexity honored or are you pushed toward simple answers?

Red flags: Pressure to heal faster, disappointment in setbacks, impatience with process, need for you to be "better."

BOUNDARIES:

- Are your boundaries respected when you set them? Can you say "I'm not ready to talk about that" without pushback? Do people respect your "no" or push past it? Is there space for you to participate at your comfort level?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Red flags: Boundary violations, pressure to share more than you're ready for, guilt when you say no.

COMPETENCE:

- If professional help is needed, is it recommended (not resisted)? Do people stay in their lane (friends don't try to be therapists)? Is there acknowledgment of what this relationship can/can't provide? Are mental health struggles treated as legitimate (not just spiritual)?

Red flags: Resistance to professional help, people operating outside their competence, mental health stigma.

PERSONAL WORK:

- Are the people involved doing their own healing work? Have they been in therapy, spiritual direction, recovery programs? Can they acknowledge their own ongoing struggles? Do they model the vulnerability they expect from you?

Red flags: No evidence of personal healing work, defensiveness about their own issues, expectation of perfection from others.

MOTIVATION:

- Do people seem genuinely invested in your wellbeing? Or do they seem to need something from you (validation, audience, ego boost)? Does your relationship serve you or are you serving them? Do they celebrate your growth even when it doesn't benefit them?

Red flags: They need you to stay wounded (to feel needed), they take credit for your healing, your growth threatens them.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

SCORING:

Count how many red flags you identified:

0-2 red flags: This relationship/group is likely safe for healing. Continue building trust and deepening connection.

3-5 red flags: Proceed with caution. The relationship/group has some problematic dynamics. Consider addressing them directly or limiting your vulnerability.

6-10 red flags: This relationship/group is likely unsafe. Consider significant distance or ending the relationship. Do not share vulnerable information here.

11+ red flags: This relationship/group is actively harmful. Exit if possible. If you can't exit (family, work), create firm boundaries and find support elsewhere.

BUILDING YOUR HEALING COMMUNITY

So how do you actually build a healing community? Where do you find these people?

Start with professional help. Find a therapist. Find a spiritual director. These are trained professionals who create safe, boundaried space. Start here because it's lower risk than trying to find safe peer relationships.

Look for existing groups. Check if your denomination has clergy peer groups. Look for recovery groups (Celebrate Recovery, 12-step, codependency groups). Find support groups for specific struggles (grief, divorce, trauma). You don't have to build from scratch—leverage what exists.

Be strategic about where you look. Don't look for healing community in your own congregation if you're the pastor. Don't look for it in your professional network if everyone sees you as competition. Look outside your immediate context.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Test the waters slowly. Don't share your deepest wounds immediately. Share something small. See how people respond. Build trust over time.

Be willing to invest time. Healing community doesn't form overnight. It takes consistent showing up, repeated vulnerability, proven trustworthiness over time.

Create what doesn't exist. If you can't find a clergy peer group, start one. If there's no support group for your specific struggle, create it. Be the person who gathers other people who need healing community.

Diversify your support. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Have multiple types of support from multiple sources. This protects you if one relationship ends or proves unsafe.

Be the kind of person you're looking for. Model the vulnerability you want to see. Practice the confidentiality you expect. Offer the presence you're seeking. Be a safe person for others.

And here's what's crucial: **You don't have to have it all figured out to participate in healing community.** You don't have to be far along in your healing. You don't have to have wisdom to share.

You just have to be honest about where you are and willing to walk alongside others who are equally broken, equally in process, equally in need of grace.

MY HEALING COMMUNITY

Let me tell you about the people who saved my life:

My therapist, who for fifteen years has helped me understand my wounds, process my trauma, and develop healthier patterns. She's never judged me. She's challenged me plenty. But she's always made it clear that I'm worthy of healing.

My spiritual director, who's walked with me through theological deconstruction, ministry trauma, and seasons of God's silence. She asks questions that open up my soul. She doesn't need me to have arrived. She's comfortable with mystery.

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My clergy peer group, seven other pastors who meet monthly to be honest about our struggles. We've created rules: confidentiality is absolute, advice is only given when requested, we can be brutally honest without fear of judgment. These men have seen me at my worst and loved me anyway.

My recovery group, where I work my codependency issues alongside other people who struggle with boundaries, people-pleasing, and using others' needs to avoid their own. We're all messy. We're all in process. We're all grateful for grace.

My closest friends, who knew me before ministry and will know me after ministry. They don't care about my platform or my success. They care about me. They show up when I'm struggling. They celebrate when I'm thriving. They're just... there.

The church I attend when I'm not leading, where I can receive ministry instead of giving it, where I can be fed instead of feeding everyone else, where I can just be a person who needs God instead of a person who represents God to others.

Collectively, these relationships create a web of support that catches me when I fall. No single relationship carries the whole weight. Each serves a different purpose, meets a different need, provides a different type of support.

And I didn't find all of these overnight. It took years. Some relationships ended along the way when they proved unsafe. Some I had to actively build. Some just developed organically over time.

But the investment was worth it. Because I literally don't know if I'd still be alive—much less still in ministry—without this community.

We heal together, not alone.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

THE INVITATION TO COMPANIONSHIP

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (NASB) paints a beautiful picture:

"Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart."

This is the invitation: companionship for the journey.

Not accountability that feels like surveillance. Not community that requires performance. Not relationships that wound more than they heal.

But genuine companionship. Fellow pilgrims. People who walk beside you in your healing, who lift you up when you fall, who provide warmth in the cold seasons, who stand with you when you're under attack.

You don't have to do this alone. You weren't designed to do this alone. God Himself, in Trinity, models community—three persons in perfect relationship, loving and being loved.

If God exists in community, why would you think you should heal in isolation?

So here's your invitation: Find your people. Build your healing community. Stop trying to do this alone.

Yes, it's risky. Yes, you might get hurt. Yes, it takes time and effort and vulnerability.

But the alternative—isolation, hiding, slow death of the soul—is worse.

You need others. You need community. You need companions for the journey.

And they need you too. Your honesty, your presence, your willingness to be broken alongside them.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The firehouse taught me something the church needs to remember: We heal together, not alone.

So find your crew. Build your brotherhood or sisterhood. Create healing circles instead of performance stages.

And discover that the journey from wound to scar is bearable—sometimes even beautiful—when you don't have to walk it alone.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Where are you currently isolated? What keeps you from seeking community for your healing journey? Fear? Shame? Past betrayals? Exhaustion? Looking at the different types of support (therapist, spiritual director, peer group, friends, receiving community), which do you currently have? Which are you missing? What's your next step in finding what you need? Think about the difference between accountability and companionship. What do you actually need right now? Are you getting it from the relationships you're in? Complete the Safe People Assessment for your current relationships. What did you discover? Do you have truly safe people in your life? Or are you trying to heal in unsafe relationships? Dietrich Bonhoeffer says some people "love their dream of community" more than actual people. What's your dream of community? How might that dream be preventing you from building real community? Where are you experiencing performance stages instead of healing circles? What would it take to create or find a healing circle where you could be honest about your process? Larry Crabb says "We need others... without it, we... would cease to grow, cease to develop, choose madness and even death." How does your isolation manifest in your life? What is it costing you? What would it take for you to be a safe person for others—to create the kind of healing circle you're longing for? What do you need to do your own work on first?

"Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up." — Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (NASB)

You will fall. That's not a question.

The question is: Will there be someone there to lift you up?

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You don't have to do this alone.

You weren't designed to do this alone.

Find your people.

Build your healing community.

Create healing circles where brokenness can be honest and wholeness can be genuinely pursued.

And discover that the journey from wound to scar is bearable when you have companions for the road.

We heal together, not alone.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 7: Grace at Ground Zero

I've been to a lot of disaster sites in my career. Building collapses, explosion sites, areas devastated by fire or flood. And there's always the same first step before any rebuilding can happen: You have to clear the rubble.

You can't build on top of debris. You can't construct something new while broken remnants of the old are still in the way. You have to remove the wreckage, haul away the damaged materials, clear the site down to solid foundation.

It's called "ground zero"—the point of impact, the place where destruction was most complete. And it's also the place where reconstruction begins. But only after the rubble is cleared.

I remember one particular structure fire where a three-story building had partially collapsed. The owner wanted to rebuild immediately—wanted to save what could be saved, work around the damage, get back to business. But the structural engineer was clear: "You can't rebuild on this. The foundation is compromised. The supporting walls are damaged. If you try to build on top of this, it will just collapse again. We have to tear it all down, clear it out, and start fresh."

The owner was devastated. It felt like total loss. It felt like starting over was admitting defeat. It felt like the damage was being made worse, not better.

But the engineer was right. You can't build on compromised foundation. You can't restore what's structurally unsound. You have to clear it completely and rebuild from scratch.

This is what grace does.

Grace is the demolition crew that clears the rubble of our shame, our performance, our self-righteousness, our attempts to earn God's love. Grace strips everything down to ground zero so that something true and lasting can be built.

And for those of us who've spent our lives building elaborate structures of religious performance, the demolition feels terrifying. It feels like loss. It feels like everything we've worked for is being destroyed.

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But it's not destruction—it's preparation for reconstruction. It's clearing the rubble so that something real can finally be built on the only foundation that holds: God's unconditional love.

This is where healing gets serious. Because you can acknowledge your wounds (Chapter 1), understand their anatomy (Chapter 2), recognize their cost (Chapter 3), give yourself permission to be broken (Chapter 4), sit in the ash heap (Chapter 5), and find community (Chapter 6)—but none of that leads to actual healing without grace.

Grace is what makes healing possible. Grace is what clears the ground. Grace is what builds on solid foundation. Grace is what transforms wounds into scars.

But first, grace has to demolish everything we've built on shame, performance, and earned approval.

And that demolition? That's the hardest part for people like me who've spent their entire lives trying to earn what can only be received as gift.

UNDERSTANDING GRACE AS PERMISSION TO BE HUMAN

I was forty-seven years old when I finally understood grace. Not theologically—I'd been preaching about grace for years. But *understood* it in my bones, in my lived experience, in a way that actually changed how I functioned in the world.

It happened in my therapist's office. I'd been working with her for about six months, processing my father wounds, my ministry trauma, my depression. And we kept circling back to the same issue: I couldn't accept that I was allowed to be human.

I couldn't accept that it was okay to have needs. That it was okay to set boundaries. That it was okay to not be okay. That it was okay to need help, to struggle, to fail, to be in process.

Every time we'd get close to this truth, I'd deflect. I'd spiritualize. I'd perform. I'd say "I know that *theologically...*" and then immediately contradict it with my behavior.

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Until one day, she stopped me mid-sentence and said: "Jeff, why do you think you have to earn permission to exist?"

I stared at her. That wasn't what we'd been talking about. Or was it?

She continued: "Because that's what you're doing. Every time you talk about your needs, you immediately justify them. Every time you admit you're struggling, you explain why it's reasonable given the circumstances. Every time you set a boundary, you apologize for it. It's like you believe you have to earn the right to be human. Like being human is something you need permission for."

And I started crying. Because she was right.

I'd spent my entire life believing that I had to earn the right to have needs, to struggle, to be imperfect. I'd believed that love—from my father, from the church, from God—was contingent on my performance, my usefulness, my strength.

I'd never given myself permission to just... be human. Beautifully, messily, limitedly, *human*.

My therapist let me cry for a while. Then she said something I'll never forget: "What if grace is just God giving you permission to be exactly what He made you to be—a human being? Not a superhero. Not a savior. Not a perfect person. Just... human. Limited. Needy. In process. Beloved anyway."

That's when grace moved from my head to my heart.

Grace is permission to be human.

Not permission to sin without consequences. Not permission to be passive or irresponsible or self-destructive. But permission to be *human*—to have limitations, to need help, to struggle, to be in process, to not have it all figured out.

Permission to be exactly what God made you to be: human. Made from dust. Dependent on grace. Incapable of saving yourself. In need of rescue.

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The Apostle Paul understood this: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9, NASB).

Grace is a gift. Not a reward. Not something you earn. Not something you achieve. A *gift*.

And gifts, by definition, can't be earned. If you earn it, it's wages. If it's contingent on your performance, it's payment. If it requires you to be worthy, it's not grace—it's transaction.

Grace is God saying: "You're human. You're limited. You're broken. You can't save yourself. And I love you anyway. Not because you've earned it. Not because you're impressive. Not because you have it all together. I love you because you're Mine. And My love is not contingent on your performance."

This is scandalous. It violates everything our performance-driven culture teaches us. It contradicts the religious systems that keep us striving, achieving, performing. It undermines the whole edifice of earned approval we've built our lives on.

And that's exactly why it's so hard to accept.

Because if grace is real—if God's love truly isn't contingent on our performance—then we have to demolish the entire structure we've built trying to earn it. We have to let go of the religious performance, the ministry success, the impressive résumé, the spiritual credentials.

We have to come to God with empty hands and admit: "I have nothing to offer. I bring nothing but my brokenness. I can't earn this. I can only receive it."

And for those of us who've built our entire identity on being the strong one, the capable one, the one who has it together—that feels like death.

But it's not death. It's the demolition that makes resurrection possible.

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THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHEAP GRACE AND COSTLY GRACE

Before we go further, I need to address something critical: Not all talk of grace is actually about grace. Some of what gets called "grace" is just permission to avoid change, responsibility, or growth.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was executed by the Nazis for his resistance to Hitler, wrote extensively about this distinction. He called it the difference between "cheap grace" and "costly grace."

Here's Bonhoeffer: "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

Cheap grace says: You're forgiven, so your sin doesn't matter. You can keep doing what you're doing. There are no consequences. God's grace covers everything, so you don't have to change.

This isn't grace—it's license. It's using God's love as permission to avoid responsibility, to continue destructive patterns, to refuse growth.

I've seen cheap grace destroy ministries:

- The pastor who excuses his ongoing affairs by saying "I'm covered by grace"
- The leader who refuses accountability because "who are you to judge me?"
- The minister who won't get help for addiction because "God's grace is sufficient"
- The church that covers up abuse because "we're all sinners saved by grace"

This isn't grace. This is grace's evil twin—the kind of "grace" that enables sin, protects abusers, prevents healing, and destroys communities.

Costly grace, on the other hand, Bonhoeffer describes this way: "Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has... Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life."

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Costly grace acknowledges that while we can't earn God's love, receiving it transforms us. Grace doesn't leave us where it found us—it changes us. Not because change earns the grace, but because grace itself is transformative.

Costly grace says:

- You're forgiven, AND you need to stop the behavior that's destroying you and others
- God loves you unconditionally, AND His love calls you to transformation
- You can't earn healing, AND you're responsible for doing the work of healing
- Your wounds don't disqualify you from God's love, AND they need to be addressed
- Grace covers your failures, AND you need to make amends where possible

The difference is critical: **Cheap grace demands nothing and changes nothing. Costly grace is freely given but transforms everything.**

Think about it in terms of my ministry wounds: If I come to grace seeking cheap grace, I say: "God forgives me for how I've wounded people through my unhealed brokenness. His grace covers it. So I don't need to change anything—I can just keep ministering the way I have been."

That's not grace—that's spiritual bypassing. That's using theology to avoid responsibility.

But if I come to costly grace, I say: "God loves me even though I've wounded people through my unhealed brokenness. His grace is big enough to cover even that. AND His grace also calls me to get help, to do the healing work, to make amends where possible, to stop the patterns that hurt people. Not to earn His love—I already have that—but because His love is transforming me into someone who wounds less and heals more."

That's costly grace. It costs me my pride, my self-righteousness, my patterns of avoidance. It costs me the comfortable familiar ways I've been operating. It costs me my illusion of self-sufficiency.

But it gives me real transformation. Real healing. Real freedom.

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Bonhoeffer is right: Grace is costly because it costs us our life—the false self, the impostor, the performance-driven identity we've built. But it's grace because it gives us our true life—the beloved, the authentic self, the person God created us to be.

WHY SHAME MUST DIE FOR HEALING TO BEGIN

Here's what I had to learn the hard way: **You cannot heal while carrying shame.**

Shame says: "I am bad. I am broken beyond repair. I am fundamentally flawed. I am unworthy of love."

And shame is a liar.

But shame is also incredibly powerful, especially for people in ministry. Because we carry not just personal shame, but professional shame, spiritual shame, theological shame.

Personal shame says: "If people knew the real me, they'd reject me."

Professional shame says: "If my congregation knew I was struggling, I'd lose my job."

Spiritual shame says: "If I were really a good Christian, I wouldn't be dealing with this."

Theological shame says: "My struggles prove that my faith is weak, my theology is wrong, or God is disappointed in me."

Layer after layer of shame, all whispering the same lie: You are not enough. You are too broken. You are unworthy.

And shame prevents healing in several devastating ways:

Shame keeps you hiding. You can't get help for what you're too ashamed to acknowledge. You can't heal wounds you're trying to hide. Shame drives you into isolation, which intensifies wounding.

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Shame distorts your view of God. When you're steeped in shame, you can't believe God loves you. You intellectually assent to grace, but you don't actually believe it applies to you. You think God tolerates you, puts up with you, uses you despite your brokenness—but doesn't actually *delight* in you.

Shame blocks self-compassion. You can't treat yourself with kindness while believing you're fundamentally bad. You can't be patient with your process while believing you should have it all figured out by now. Shame makes you your own worst critic, your harshest judge, your most relentless accuser.

Shame creates perfectionism. If you believe you're fundamentally flawed, you compensate by trying to perform perfectly. You can never make a mistake, never show weakness, never admit need. Because any imperfection confirms the shame message: See? You really are broken.

Shame drives destructive patterns. Shame that isn't transformed gets acted out. The minister who carries sexual shame often falls into sexual sin. The leader who carries shame about anger often has rage explosions. The pastor who carries shame about inadequacy becomes controlling and domineering.

Grace is the only thing powerful enough to kill shame.

Brennan Manning writes: "To live by grace means to acknowledge my whole life story, the light side and the dark. In admitting my shadow side I learn who I am and what God's grace means."

Grace says: "Bring your shadow into the light. Bring the shameful parts. Bring what you think disqualifies you. Bring your darkness. And watch it lose its power in the presence of unconditional love."

When shame encounters grace, one of them has to die. And grace is stronger.

I remember the day my shame around my mental health started to die. I was in a particularly dark depressive episode, and I finally told my therapist, "I'm ashamed that I need medication. I feel like a failure as a Christian because I can't just pray my way out of this."

She looked at me and said something simple but devastating to my shame: "Do you think diabetics are failures as Christians because they need insulin?"

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I stared at her. "No, of course not."

"Then why do you think you're a failure because you need medication for a brain chemistry issue? Your brain is an organ, just like your pancreas. Sometimes organs need medical support. That's not a spiritual failure—it's biology."

And something in my shame structure cracked. Because she was right. I wouldn't shame someone for needing insulin. Why was I shaming myself for needing antidepressants?

The shame around my mental health didn't die completely that day—shame rarely dies in a single moment. But it started dying. And as it died, healing became possible.

Grace kills shame by replacing the core message.

Shame says: "You are bad." Grace says: "You are beloved."

Shame says: "You are broken beyond repair." Grace says: "You are broken and being restored."

Shame says: "You must hide your darkness." Grace says: "Bring your darkness into My light."

Shame says: "You must earn love." Grace says: "You already have it."

When you finally believe—really believe—that God's love for you isn't contingent on your performance, shame loses its power. Because shame's power comes from the fear that if you're fully known, you won't be loved. But grace says: "You are fully known and fully loved. Not despite your brokenness, but right in the middle of it."

SELF-COMPASSION AS SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

One of the most transformative things my therapist taught me was the practice of self-compassion. And one of the hardest.

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Self-compassion is treating yourself with the same kindness, understanding, and patience you'd offer to someone you love who's struggling.

It sounds simple. It's incredibly difficult.

Because most of us—especially those of us in ministry—are practiced at compassion for *others* but brutal with ourselves. We can sit with someone else's pain for hours without judgment. But when we struggle? We're harsh, critical, impatient, condemning.

We'd never say to someone else what we say to ourselves:

- "You should be over this by now."
- "Stop being so weak."
- "Other people have it worse."
- "You're being dramatic."
- "Just get it together."

But we say these things to ourselves constantly. And we think this self-criticism is somehow spiritual, somehow helpful, somehow necessary to keep us from becoming self-indulgent or lazy.

But self-criticism doesn't lead to transformation. Research shows that self-criticism actually *decreases* motivation and *increases* shame, anxiety, and depression. While self-compassion *increases* resilience, motivation, and the ability to learn from mistakes.

Self-compassion isn't self-indulgence. It's recognizing your humanity and treating yourself as someone worthy of kindness.

Here's what self-compassion looks like practically:

Instead of: "I can't believe I'm struggling with this again. I'm such a failure." **Self-compassion says:** "This is hard, and it's okay that I'm struggling. I'm doing the best I can."

Instead of: "I should be further along in my healing by now. What's wrong with me?" **Self-compassion says:** "Healing takes time. I'm making progress, even when it doesn't feel like it."

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Instead of: "I shouldn't have needs. I should be able to handle this on my own." **Self-compassion says:** "Everyone has needs. It's human. And it's okay to ask for help."

Instead of: "I'm so weak for needing therapy/medication/support." **Self-compassion says:** "Getting help is a sign of wisdom, not weakness. I'm taking care of myself."

I had to learn to practice self-compassion as a spiritual discipline—something I intentionally worked on, not something that came naturally.

I started with a simple practice my therapist gave me: When I noticed myself being harsh or critical with myself, I'd pause and ask, "What would I say to someone I love who was in this situation?" Then I'd say that to myself instead.

It felt ridiculous at first. Fake. Like I was letting myself off the hook.

But slowly, over time, it started to change how I related to myself. I started noticing my self-criticism more quickly. I started being gentler with my process. I started treating myself as someone worthy of kindness.

And here's what surprised me: As I became more compassionate with myself, I actually became *more* motivated to change, not less. Because I wasn't operating from shame anymore—I was operating from love. And love is a much more powerful motivator than shame.

This is grace in action. Grace doesn't just change how God relates to us—it changes how we relate to ourselves.

Philip Yancey captures this beautifully: "Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more, and nothing we can do to make God love us less."

If that's true—if God's love really is unconditional—then self-compassion isn't self-indulgence. It's alignment with how God sees us. It's treating ourselves the way God treats us.

And if we can't be compassionate with ourselves, how can we authentically extend compassion to others?

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THE SCANDALOUS PARTICULARITY OF GOD'S GRACE

There's something about grace that's deeply offensive to our sense of justice and fairness. It's what I call the "scandalous particularity" of God's grace.

Grace doesn't just love humanity in general. Grace loves *you* in particular. Specifically. Uniquely. With all your specific failures, your particular wounds, your individual struggles.

Romans 5:20 (NASB) says: "The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."

Read that again. Where sin *increased*, grace *abounded all the more*.

Not: "If you keep your sin to a manageable level, grace will cover it." Not: "Grace is available for small sins but not big ones." Not: "Grace applies to everyone except the really broken ones."

But: Where sin increased—where it got worse, where it multiplied, where it seemed hopeless—grace abounded *all the more*.

This is scandalous. It violates our sense of fairness. It seems to reward bad behavior. It doesn't make sense from a justice perspective.

And it's exactly what broken people need to hear.

Let me tell you about the moment this became real for me. I was sitting in spiritual direction, processing my grief over the damage I'd caused in my relationships—particularly with my daughters. The weight of my failures as a father was crushing me.

I told my spiritual director, "I don't know how to accept grace for this. I understand theologically that God forgives me. But I can't forgive myself. Because the damage is real. My daughters are really hurt. I can't undo it. And I don't know how to live with that."

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She let me sit in that for a while. Then she said: "What if grace doesn't undo the damage? What if grace doesn't erase the consequences? What if grace is God saying, 'I see the full scope of what you've done, the real damage you've caused, the ways you've failed—and I love you anyway. Not because it doesn't matter, but because My love is bigger than your failure'?"

I started crying. Because that was exactly what I needed to hear.

I didn't need grace to make my failures disappear. I needed grace to hold me in my failures while I did the work of repair. I needed grace to love me in the middle of my mess, not after I cleaned it up.

That's the scandal of grace: **It loves you in your particularity—your specific failures, your unique brokenness, your individual wounds—not despite them, but right in the middle of them.**

Grace doesn't say: "Clean yourself up and then I'll love you." Grace says: "You're a mess, and I love you. Let's work on this together."

Grace doesn't say: "Once you're worthy, you can approach me." Grace says: "You'll never be worthy on your own, so I'm approaching you."

Grace doesn't say: "Your sin disqualifies you." Grace says: "Where your sin increased, My love abounded all the more."

This is particularly powerful for ministers because we carry the weight of being "examples," "leaders," "representatives of God." We feel like our failures are worse because we should know better, because people are watching, because we're supposed to be further along.

But grace says: Your ministry position doesn't make you less in need of grace—it makes you more aware of your need. Your theological education doesn't make your failures more shameful—it makes you more conscious of your humanity. Your visibility doesn't increase your need to perform—it increases your need to be honest.

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The pastor who had the affair needs the same grace as the person in the pew. The worship leader battling addiction needs the same grace as the recovering addict in the congregation. The chaplain experiencing burnout needs the same grace as the patient in crisis.

There's no hierarchy in grace. There's no "more deserving" or "less deserving." There's just desperate need meeting scandalous abundance.

And this changes everything about how we approach healing.

GRACE AS THE FOUNDATION FOR HEALING

Here's what I finally understood: **You cannot heal from a foundation of shame. You can only heal from a foundation of grace.**

If you're trying to heal in order to earn God's love, you'll never heal. Because the pressure to perform will drive you right back into the patterns that wounded you in the first place.

If you're trying to heal to prove your worth, you'll sabotage your healing. Because every setback will confirm your shame, and you'll give up.

If you're trying to heal to meet others' expectations, you'll burn out. Because you'll never heal fast enough or completely enough to satisfy everyone.

But if you can heal from a foundation of grace—from the deep knowing that you're loved before, during, and after the healing process—then healing becomes possible.

Because grace says:

- You don't have to heal to be loved. You're loved while you're broken.
- You don't have to perform wholeness. You can be in process.
- You don't have to hide your struggles. You can be honest about where you are.
- You don't have to heal perfectly. You can have setbacks and still be beloved.
- You don't have to heal alone. You can ask for help without shame.

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This is the ground zero where healing begins. This is the cleared foundation on which something true can be built.

And the clearing process—the demolition of shame, performance, and earned approval—is painful. It feels like loss. It feels like everything you've built is being torn down.

But you can't build authentic healing on a foundation of performance and shame. You can only build it on grace.

Let me tell you what this looked like for me practically:

Before grace (foundation of shame):

- I pushed myself to heal faster, criticized myself for every setback
- I hid my struggles because admitting them felt like failure
- I white-knuckled through depression without getting help
- I performed wholeness in public while falling apart in private
- I measured my worth by my ministry effectiveness
- I believed God tolerated me but was disappointed in my weakness

After encountering grace (foundation of love):

- I give myself permission to heal at my own pace
- I'm honest about my struggles with safe people
- I get professional help without shame
- I let myself be in process without performing arrival
- I find my worth in being God's beloved, not in what I accomplish
- I believe God loves me—not despite my brokenness, but right in the middle of it

The difference is everything. And it all comes down to foundation.

Shame-based healing is performance-driven, exhausting, and ultimately impossible. Grace-based healing is permission-giving, sustainable, and transformative.

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THE MOMENT I UNDERSTOOD I DIDN'T HAVE TO EARN MY HEALING

I need to tell you about the night everything changed for me.

I was six months into therapy, three months into taking antidepressants, deep in the work of processing childhood trauma and ministry wounding. And I was exhausted. Not just physically—soul-exhausted. Tired of the work. Tired of feeling broken. Tired of being in process.

I sat in my truck in a church parking lot—not my church, just a church I'd pulled into to have a breakdown in private—and I prayed what might be the most honest prayer I've ever prayed:

"God, I can't do this anymore. I'm trying so hard to heal, to get better, to be whole. I'm doing therapy. I'm taking medication. I'm working the steps. I'm reading the books. I'm doing everything right. And I'm still broken. I'm still depressed. I'm still struggling.

"And I'm so tired. I'm tired of trying to fix myself. I'm tired of feeling like I'm failing at healing. I'm tired of being the broken pastor who can't get it together.

"I need You to tell me: Is this ever going to be enough? Am I ever going to be enough? Or am I just going to be broken forever?"

I sat there in the silence, crying, waiting for... I don't know what. A voice? A verse? Some assurance that if I just kept trying harder, I'd eventually arrive?

What came instead was a simple, quiet knowing. Not a voice, but a presence. And in that presence, a truth settled into my bones:

You don't have to earn this. You don't have to fix yourself to be loved. You're already loved—broken, depressed, struggling, in-process, exactly as you are right now. My grace is not waiting for you at the finish line. My grace is with you in the middle of the mess.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

I sat there stunned. Because I'd been operating from the assumption that I needed to heal in order to be acceptable to God. That my brokenness was a problem God was putting up with until I could get it together. That grace was available *for* healing, but love was contingent on *achieving* healing.

But what if that was backwards?

What if I was already loved—completely, fully, unconditionally—and healing was just the natural outgrowth of that love, not the prerequisite for it?

What if I didn't have to earn my healing? What if I could just... receive it? As gift? As grace?

I called my therapist the next day and tried to explain what had happened. She smiled—the knowing smile of someone who's been waiting for you to get it.

"Jeff," she said, "you've been trying to heal in order to be worthy of love. But you can't heal from that foundation. You can only heal from the foundation of already being loved. You've had it backwards."

She was right. I'd had it backwards my entire life.

I'd been trying to earn what was already mine. I'd been working for approval I already had. I'd been striving to become worthy when I was already beloved.

And the moment I finally understood that—the moment grace moved from theological concept to lived reality—healing became possible in a way it never had been before.

LIVING FROM GRACE

So what does it mean to actually live from grace? To build your healing on the foundation of unconditional love rather than conditional performance?

It means:

THE WOUNDED HEALER

You start from belovedness, not brokenness. Yes, you're broken. Yes, you need healing. But your fundamental identity is not "broken person trying to get fixed." It's "beloved child of God who is in process of healing." The order matters.

You treat yourself as God treats you. With patience. With compassion. With commitment that doesn't waiver based on your performance. With love that isn't contingent on your progress.

You measure progress by honest engagement, not perfect performance. Are you showing up for therapy? Are you taking your medication? Are you being honest with your support people? That's progress—even when you don't feel better yet.

You give yourself permission to be in process. You don't have to have it all figured out. You don't have to be healed already. You can be right in the messy middle and still be beloved.

You let go of timeline demands. Healing takes as long as it takes. You can't rush it. You can't perform your way to faster healing. You just have to do the work and trust the process.

You celebrate small victories. You got out of bed during depression? That's a victory. You asked for help instead of isolating? That's growth. You set a boundary without apologizing? That's progress.

You accept help without shame. Therapy isn't failure—it's wisdom. Medication isn't weakness—it's healthcare. Support groups aren't crutches—they're community. Needing help is human.

You practice self-compassion. When you have a setback, you speak to yourself with kindness: "This is hard. I'm struggling. That's okay. I'll keep going."

You trust that God's grace is bigger than your brokenness. Whatever you're carrying—whatever you've done, whatever's been done to you, whatever you're struggling with—grace is bigger. Always.

This isn't easy. Especially for those of us who've spent our lives performing, achieving, earning.

But it's the only foundation that holds.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

You cannot heal from shame. You can only heal from grace.

GRACE FOR THE JOURNEY AHEAD

As we move forward in this book—as we talk about integrating your story (Chapter 8), redeeming your wounds (Chapter 9), and eventually ministering from scars rather than wounds—grace is the foundation for all of it.

You can't integrate your story from a place of shame—you have to accept your whole story, light and shadow, as part of your belovedness.

You can't redeem your wounds from a place of performance—you have to receive redemption as gift, not achievement.

You can't minister from scars from a place of self-righteousness—you have to minister from the humble knowing that you've been wounded, you've been healed by grace, and you're extending that same grace to others.

Grace isn't just the beginning of the healing journey. Grace is the foundation, the fuel, and the destination.

Brennan Manning got it right: "To live by grace means to acknowledge my whole life story, the light side and the dark. In admitting my shadow side I learn who I am and what God's grace means."

This is the invitation: Stop trying to earn what you already have. Stop performing for approval you already possess. Stop hiding your shadow from the Light that already loves you.

Bring your whole story—the victories and the failures, the light and the dark, the healed and the still-bleeding. Bring it all.

And discover that grace was there all along, waiting for you to stop performing and start receiving.

The rubble has been cleared. The shame has been demolished. The foundation of grace is solid.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Now we can begin to build.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

When have you experienced the difference between knowing grace theologically and experiencing it in your bones? What made the difference? Where are you still trying to earn God's love or approval? What would it mean to stop performing and start receiving? Reflect on Bonhoeffer's distinction between cheap grace and costly grace. Where might you be seeking cheap grace (permission to avoid change)? Where do you need to receive costly grace (transformative love that calls you to growth)? What shame messages do you carry? Write them down. Now write what grace says in response to each one. Which voice do you more naturally believe? How do you talk to yourself when you're struggling? Would you talk to someone you love that way? What would self-compassion sound like for you? Philip Yancey says, "Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more, and nothing we can do to make God love us less." Do you actually believe this for yourself? What would change if you did? Think about your healing journey. Are you trying to heal *in order to* be loved by God? Or are you healing *because* you're already loved? How does that shift in foundation change your approach? What would it look like to demolish the structures you've built on shame and performance? What would healing built on grace look like for you specifically?

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." — Ephesians 2:8-9 (NASB)

Grace is a gift. Not a reward. Not something you earn. Not something you achieve.

A gift.

You can't earn it. You don't deserve it. You can't lose it by failing.

You can only receive it.

And in receiving it, you discover the foundation on which healing becomes possible.

Stop trying to clear the rubble through your own effort. Let grace do the demolition.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Stop trying to build on shame and performance. Let grace establish a foundation that actually holds.

Stop trying to earn your healing. Start receiving it as gift.

The ground has been cleared. The foundation is solid. Grace is sufficient.

Now the real work of healing can begin.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

PART THREE: THE INTEGRATION

"Scars tell a story of survival and hope"

CHAPTER 8: From Wound to Scar

I've seen a lot of burn injuries in my firefighting career. Some were minor—first-degree burns that healed quickly and left no trace. Others were severe—second and third-degree burns that required hospitalization, skin grafts, months of treatment.

The human body's response to a severe burn is remarkable. Once the initial trauma is treated—the wound cleaned, dead tissue removed, infection prevented—the body begins an intricate process of repair. It's not instant. It can't be rushed. But if you do everything right and give it time, the body knows how to heal.

Here's what happens medically:

Phase One: Inflammation (Days 1-4) Blood vessels constrict to prevent blood loss, then dilate to bring healing nutrients. White blood cells flood the area to fight infection. The wound is red, swollen, painful. This is active damage control.

Phase Two: Proliferation (Days 4-21) New tissue begins to form. Fibroblasts create collagen—the building blocks of scar tissue. Blood vessels regrow. The wound starts to close. This is active rebuilding.

Phase Three: Maturation (21 days to 2 years) Collagen remodels itself, becoming stronger and more organized. Blood vessels that are no longer needed are absorbed. The scar flattens, softens, fades. This is long-term integration.

The final result is scar tissue—tissue that's actually *stronger* than the original skin it replaced. It looks different. It feels different. It's permanent evidence that trauma occurred. But it's healed. It's integrated. It's no longer an active wound.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

I carry scars from my firefighting days. The burn on my shoulder from that collapsed ceiling. A scar on my hand from broken glass during a rescue. One on my leg from getting caught on debris during a search. Each one tells a story. Each one reminds me of a moment when I was wounded and survived.

And each one is fundamentally different from an active wound. I can touch them without pain. I can tell the stories without reliving the trauma. They're part of my body's history, but they're not active sites of damage.

This is what needs to happen with the wounds of the soul. They need to move from active trauma to integrated scar. From bleeding wound to testimony of survival. From source of shame to evidence of grace.

But just like physical wound healing, this process can't be rushed. It requires specific conditions. It takes time. And if you interfere with the process—if you keep picking at the wound, or expose it to further trauma, or don't give it proper treatment—it won't heal properly. It will either stay an open wound or heal badly, creating problematic scar tissue.

So let's talk about what has to happen for a wound of the soul to become a scar. Let's understand the process, the timeline, the conditions required. Let's learn to distinguish between wounds that are still actively bleeding and scars that are still tender but healed.

Because there's a massive difference between ministering *from* a wound and ministering *with* a scar. And understanding that difference changes everything.

UNDERSTANDING THE SCAR TISSUE OF THE SOUL

When I first started working with my therapist on my childhood trauma, I asked her a question that revealed how little I understood about healing: "How long until I'm over this?"

THE WOUNDED HEALER

She smiled gently—the kind of smile that says you've asked the wrong question. "Jeff, you're not going to 'get over' childhood trauma. That's not how this works. What we're aiming for is integration, not erasure."

I didn't understand. I wanted to be *fixed*. I wanted the wound to disappear. I wanted to go back to how I was before—except I'd never been whole before. The wound was there from childhood. There was no "before" to return to.

"Think of it like this," she said. "Physical scars don't erase the fact that you were injured. They're permanent evidence of trauma. But they're healed. They're integrated into your body. They don't hurt anymore. You can tell the story without reliving the pain. That's what we're aiming for—not erasing your story, but healing it so it becomes scar tissue instead of an open wound."

This was revolutionary for me. Because I'd been operating under the assumption that healing meant making the trauma disappear, making it like it never happened, getting back to some mythical state of unwoundedness.

But that's not how souls work any more than it's how bodies work.

Scar tissue of the soul is the integrated, healed version of your trauma. It's acknowledging that yes, this happened. Yes, it damaged you. Yes, it's part of your story. But it's no longer an active site of bleeding. It's no longer controlling your life. It's no longer the lens through which you see everything.

It's healed. Not erased. Not forgotten. Not minimized. But healed.

Here's what that looks like in practice:

THE WOUNDED HEALER

With my father wounds (active wound stage):

- I couldn't hear criticism without feeling like that small boy being told he wasn't good enough
- I compulsively sought approval from authority figures
- I recreated my father relationship in ministry, becoming controlling and harsh
- I couldn't separate my current relationships from my past trauma
- Every trigger sent me back to the original wound

With my father wounds (scar tissue stage):

- I can hear criticism and assess it objectively without emotional flooding
- I notice when I'm seeking approval but I'm not driven by that need
- I've broken the pattern of becoming my father in my leadership
- I can see current relationships for what they are, not through the lens of past trauma
- Triggers still happen, but they don't send me spiraling—I notice them, name them, and move through them

The difference is integration. The wound has been processed, treated, given time to heal. The trauma is still part of my story—I'm still a man whose father wounded him. But that wound has become scar tissue. It's healed. It's integrated. It tells a story, but it no longer bleeds.

This is what we're aiming for. Not denial. Not minimization. Not spiritual bypassing that says "I'm over it" when you're not. But actual, deep, integrated healing that transforms wound to scar.

WHAT MAKES A WOUND A SCAR: THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS

So what has to happen for a wound to become a scar? Based on both my medical training as a firefighter and my personal healing journey, here are the necessary conditions:

1. TIME

You cannot rush scar formation. In physical wound healing, the maturation phase—where the wound actually becomes scar tissue—takes anywhere from 21 days to 2 years depending on the severity of the injury.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

With psychological and spiritual wounds, the timeline is similar but less predictable. Deep childhood trauma might take years to integrate. Acute ministry betrayal might take months. The death of a loved one follows its own unpredictable timeline.

But here's what's true across all types of wounds: **Healing cannot be rushed.**

I wanted to be "over" my depression in weeks. It took years. I wanted to heal my father wounds in months. It's been a decade and there are still tender spots. I wanted to process my ministry trauma quickly so I could get back to work. It required an extended sabbatical and ongoing therapy.

Every time I tried to rush the process—to declare myself healed before I actually was, to skip steps in the healing process, to perform recovery I didn't genuinely feel—I ended up either re-wounding myself or creating problematic scar tissue.

Time is not passive waiting. Time is active healing. Your body/soul is doing work during that time—processing, integrating, rebuilding. But the work takes as long as it takes. You can cooperate with it or interfere with it, but you can't speed it up through willpower.

2. TREATMENT

Physical wounds need proper medical care. They need to be cleaned, protected from infection, sometimes sutured or grafted, monitored for complications.

Soul wounds need proper therapeutic care. They need to be:

Acknowledged honestly - You can't heal what you won't admit is there. The wound has to be brought out of hiding and looked at honestly.

Cleaned out - Dead tissue has to be removed. In psychological terms, this means dealing with the lies you've believed, the toxic patterns you've developed, the false narratives you've constructed around the wound.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Protected from infection - The wound needs safe space to heal. This means boundaries that prevent further wounding, communities that support healing, removal from toxic environments when necessary.

Treated professionally when needed - Some wounds require specialized care. Therapy. Medication. Intensive treatment programs. You wouldn't try to treat third-degree burns at home; don't try to treat severe trauma without professional help.

Monitored for complications - Healing doesn't always go smoothly. There can be setbacks, infections, complications. You need people watching with you—therapists, spiritual directors, support groups—who can identify when something's going wrong.

I learned this the hard way. I tried to "heal" my depression through willpower and prayer alone. It didn't work because depression is often a medical condition that requires medical treatment. Once I added therapy and medication to prayer and spiritual practices, actual healing became possible.

Treatment matters. The right treatment, applied properly, over sufficient time.

3. INTEGRATION

This is the part that most people miss. A wound doesn't become a scar just through passage of time. It becomes a scar through integration—the process of the new tissue being woven into the existing structure.

For soul wounds, integration means:

Making meaning of the trauma - Not justifying it, not saying it was good, but finding meaning in it. How has this shaped you? What have you learned? How has it changed your understanding of God, yourself, others?

Incorporating it into your narrative - This happened. It's part of your story. Not the only part, not the defining part, but a real part. You don't erase chapters of your story; you integrate them into the whole arc.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Developing new patterns - The wound created certain patterns—defensive mechanisms, coping strategies, relational dynamics. Healing means developing new, healthier patterns to replace the wound-driven ones.

Finding purpose in the pain - Eventually, your scar can serve others. Not immediately—you can't minister from active wounds. But once it's healed, your scar becomes credentials for helping others with similar wounds.

Integration is what makes the difference between "getting over it" and "growing through it."

Getting over it says: This happened, it's in the past, I'm moving on, I don't think about it anymore.

Growing through it says: This happened, it changed me, I've processed it, I've learned from it, it's integrated into who I am today, and it's made me more compassionate, more whole, more human.

Getting over it is suppression. Growing through it is integration.

4. PROPER ENVIRONMENT

Physical wounds heal better in certain conditions. They need to be kept clean, moist (not too wet, not too dry), protected from further trauma, given proper nutrition and rest.

Soul wounds also need the right environment to heal:

Safety - You can't heal in the environment that wounded you. If you're in an abusive relationship, you have to get out before healing can occur. If you're in a toxic ministry context, you might need to leave. If you're in a shame-based community, you need distance.

Support - Healing happens in community. You need safe people, healing relationships, professional help, spiritual guidance. Isolation prevents healing.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Grace - As we discussed in Chapter 7, you cannot heal from a foundation of shame. The environment needs to be one of grace—unconditional love, acceptance of your process, permission to be broken while healing.

Truth-telling - Healing requires honesty. Environments that demand pretense, performance, or spiritual bypassing prevent genuine healing.

Appropriate challenge - This seems paradoxical with safety, but both are needed. You need to be safe enough to be vulnerable, but challenged enough to grow. Therapy that's only comfort without any challenge doesn't produce growth. Community that's only challenge without safety doesn't produce healing.

I couldn't heal my ministry wounds while still pastoring the church where I'd been wounded. I had to leave. I couldn't heal my codependency while still operating in codependent relationships. I had to establish boundaries. I couldn't heal my shame while in communities that reinforced shame messages. I had to find grace-based community.

Environment matters. You might need to change your environment before healing can occur.

THE WOUND-TO-SCAR TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

Let me give you a visual framework for understanding how wounds become scars. This isn't a rigid timeline—everyone's healing happens at different paces—but it shows the general progression:

STAGE 1: ACTIVE WOUND

— Characteristics: Bleeding, painful, open, vulnerable to infection

— Needs: Immediate attention, protection, treatment

— Dangers: Further trauma, infection, becoming chronic

— Duration: Varies—could be days, months, or ongoing if untreated

THE WOUNDED HEALER

└─ Ministry Capacity: Cannot minister from this place—will wound others

STAGE 2: EARLY HEALING

└─ Characteristics: Scabbing, inflammation, new tissue forming

└─ Needs: Continued protection, proper treatment, patience

└─ Dangers: Re-opening, premature declaration of healing

└─ Duration: Weeks to months typically

└─ Ministry Capacity: Very limited—focus needs to be on healing

STAGE 3: CLOSING

└─ Characteristics: Surface healed, new tissue integrated, less painful

└─ Needs: Continued care, monitoring, gentle testing

└─ Dangers: Assuming fully healed when healing is incomplete

└─ Duration: Months to a year

└─ Ministry Capacity: Can begin selective, limited ministry with support

STAGE 4: MATURATION (Becoming Scar Tissue)

└─ Characteristics: Tissue remodeling, strengthening, integration

└─ Needs: Time, continued self-awareness, ongoing support

└─ Dangers: Complacency, stopping treatment prematurely

THE WOUNDED HEALER

- Duration: 1-2 years or longer for severe trauma
- Ministry Capacity: Can minister with the scar, not from the wound

STAGE 5: MATURE SCAR

- Characteristics: Integrated, strength, testimony rather than tragedy
- Needs: Occasional maintenance, awareness of triggers
- Dangers: Assuming scar means invulnerable
- Duration: Ongoing—scars are permanent
- Ministry Capacity: Full ministry from healed place—scar as credential

CRITICAL NOTES:

- Movement between stages isn't always linear—setbacks happen
- Different wounds might be at different stages simultaneously
- Some wounds take longer to heal than others
- Professional help can accelerate healing but can't skip stages
- Community support is essential at every stage
- Grace is the foundation throughout the entire process

SCARS AS TESTIMONY, NOT TRAGEDY

Here's where the transformation becomes beautiful: When a wound becomes a scar, it shifts from tragedy to testimony.

A wound is active pain. A scar is evidence of survival.

A wound is something you're suffering through. A scar is something you've come through.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

A wound demands attention and care. A scar tells a story and offers hope.

Jesus understood this. After the resurrection, He still carried His scars. Thomas wanted proof that the risen Christ was the same Jesus who'd been crucified, and Jesus showed him: "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing" (John 20:27, NASB).

The glorified body of Christ includes evidence of wounds. The scars remain. They're part of who He is, part of His identity, part of His story.

And those scars are what make Him able to empathize with our suffering: "But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5, NASB).

His scars healed us. Not His lack of scars. Not His invulnerability. His scars.

This is the pattern for wounded healers: **Your scars—not your invulnerability—become your ministry.**

Let me show you what this looks like in practice:

My father wounds (when they were active wounds):

- I couldn't talk about my father without emotional flooding
- Mentioning my childhood trauma brought up intense shame
- I avoided the topic entirely or minimized it when it came up
- If I did share, it was to get sympathy or to excuse my behavior
- Talking about it re-traumatized me

THE WOUNDED HEALER

My father wounds (now that they're scars):

- I can talk about my father and the wounding with appropriate emotion but without being overwhelmed
- I can share the story as part of my journey without shame
- I choose when and with whom to share, based on purpose not avoidance
- When I share, it's to offer hope to others with similar wounds
- Talking about it doesn't re-traumatize me—it reminds me of how far I've come

The difference is that the wound has become testimony. It's no longer a site of active trauma—it's evidence of God's healing grace.

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

The people who've meant most in my healing journey aren't those who had all the answers. They're those who had scars similar to my wounds and could say, "I know. I've been there. I survived. You will too."

Your scars can do that for others. But only when they're actually scars, not still-bleeding wounds.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN "GETTING OVER IT" AND "GROWING THROUGH IT"

Our culture loves quick fixes and tidy endings. We want people to "get over" their trauma, "move on" from their pain, "put it behind them" and never look back.

But that's not how real healing works. That's suppression, not integration. That's performing recovery, not genuine transformation.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

"Getting over it" says:

- It's in the past, so it doesn't affect me now
- I don't think about it anymore
- It's irrelevant to who I am today
- Real strength means it doesn't bother me
- Bringing it up means I haven't healed
- I should be able to just move on

"Growing through it" says:

- It happened, and it shaped me
- I've processed it and integrated it
- It's part of my story and identity
- Real strength means I can acknowledge it honestly
- Sharing it can help others
- I've moved forward, but it's still part of my journey

The difference is crucial. "Getting over it" is erasure. "Growing through it" is integration.

I learned this distinction through grief. When my best friend from the firehouse died in a line-of-duty death, people kept telling me I needed to "get over it" and "move on." They meant well. But their advice was damaging.

Because you don't "get over" losing someone you love. You grow through it. You integrate the loss into your life. You learn to carry it differently. You find meaning in the pain. You honor the person by how you live after they're gone.

Years later, I can talk about my friend without breaking down. I can celebrate his life without being crushed by his death. I can acknowledge the loss without being defined by it.

That's not "getting over it." That's having grown through it.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The same is true for all our wounds. You don't "get over" childhood trauma—you grow through it, integrating the experience and learning from it. You don't "get over" ministry betrayal—you grow through it, developing wisdom and discernment. You don't "get over" your moral failures—you grow through them, becoming more humble and compassionate.

C.S. Lewis, writing about grief after his wife's death, captures this: "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear."

Grief—and by extension, all deep wounding—creates lasting change. It transforms you. You're not the same person after as you were before. And trying to "get back to normal" is futile because there is no going back. There's only growing forward.

Your scars tell the story of who you've become through what you've survived. That's not tragedy—that's testimony.

WHY SOME SCARS STAY TENDER

I need to tell you something important: **Not all scars heal the same way. Some stay tender.**

The burn scar on my shoulder—the one from the collapsed ceiling—healed beautifully. It's visible, but it doesn't hurt. I can touch it without pain. It doesn't limit my movement. It's just... there. Evidence of trauma that's fully healed.

But I have another scar, on my hand, from broken glass during a rescue. That one never fully stopped hurting. It's healed—it's closed, integrated, not actively bleeding. But it aches in cold weather. Certain kinds of pressure on it cause discomfort. It's more sensitive than the surrounding tissue.

It's a scar, not a wound. But it's a tender scar.

The same is true for soul wounds. Some heal completely and become scars you can touch without pain. Others heal but remain tender—you can tell the story, you've integrated the trauma, you've done the work, but there's still an ache.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

My father wounds have healed into scars. I can talk about my childhood without emotional flooding. I've broken the patterns my wounding created. I've forgiven my father. I've done the work.

But it's still tender. On Father's Day, there's still an ache. When I see healthy father-daughter relationships, there's still a twinge of grief for what I didn't have with my own daughters. When certain triggers happen—a critical voice, a sense of not measuring up—that old scar tissue reminds me it's there.

This is normal. This doesn't mean you haven't healed. It means you're human.

Here's what makes scars stay tender:

The wound was particularly deep. Some trauma cuts deeper than others. Childhood abuse creates deeper wounds than adult disappointments. The loss of a child creates different scar tissue than other losses. Deep wounds create more sensitive scars.

The wound happened during formative years. Trauma that occurs when you're young, when your identity and nervous system are still forming, often creates more persistent sensitivity. It gets wired into your brain in ways that adult trauma doesn't.

The wound involved profound betrayal. Betrayal by people who should have protected you, loved you, been trustworthy—parents, spouses, spiritual leaders—creates especially tender scars. Trust violations leave lasting sensitivity.

The wound was compounded by multiple traumas. If the same area gets wounded repeatedly—if you experience abandonment trauma multiple times, or betrayal in multiple relationships, or loss after loss—the scar tissue becomes more complex and more tender.

The wound affected your sense of self or safety. Trauma that fundamentally changed how you see yourself, how you see the world, how safe you feel—these create scars that remain sensitive because they touched something core.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

You have limited support in healing. Wounds that heal with good support often heal better than wounds you had to heal alone. Isolation during the healing process can lead to more problematic or tender scar tissue.

If your scars stay tender, it doesn't mean:

- You haven't done enough healing work
- You lack faith or trust in God
- You're weak or broken beyond repair
- You can't minister from this place
- Something is wrong with you

It means:

- You were deeply wounded
- You're human
- Some wounds leave lasting marks
- You've survived something significant
- You need to honor the tenderness with appropriate self-care

How to live with tender scars:

Know your triggers. Understand what situations, people, or circumstances press on that tender scar tissue. This isn't avoiding them forever—it's being aware so you can prepare.

Give yourself grace on hard days. Some days the scar will ache more. Father's Day. The anniversary of a loss. Situations that echo the original trauma. It's okay if those days are harder.

Don't over-expose before you're ready. Just because it's healed doesn't mean you need to touch it constantly or let everyone touch it. Protect tender scars appropriately.

Maintain your healing practices. Even after wounds become scars, you still need therapy check-ins, spiritual direction, community support. Scars need maintenance.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Be honest about limitations. Some ministry contexts will be harder for you because of your particular scars. That's okay. Honor your limitations without shame.

Remember it's a sign of survival. Tender scars mean you survived something significant. The tenderness is evidence of the depth of what you went through and came through.

My ministry wounds from pastoral betrayal have healed into scars. But they're tender scars. I can serve in ministry again. I can work with boards. I can trust church leadership. But I do it differently now. I have boundaries I didn't have before. I'm more careful about who gets access to my vulnerability. I notice red flags faster.

Is this because I haven't fully healed? No. It's because I've healed wisely. The scar tissue is there for a reason—to protect me, to remind me, to make me more cautious in healthy ways.

Tender scars are not failure. They're wisdom written in your body and soul.

WHEN SCARS TEAR OPEN

I need to be honest about something: Sometimes scars tear open. Sometimes you think you're healed, and then something happens that rips the wound back open.

This is called re-traumatization, and it's one of the most discouraging experiences in the healing journey. Because you thought you were done. You thought the wound had become a scar. And then suddenly you're bleeding again.

I experienced this with my ministry trauma. I'd done years of therapy processing my wounding from pastoral ministry. I'd worked through the betrayal, the grief, the anger. I'd integrated it into my story. I thought it was healed—scar tissue, not active wound.

Then I started consulting with churches, helping them with pastoral transitions and leadership development. And in one particular church, the board dynamics were eerily similar to the church where I'd been wounded. Same power plays. Same manipulation. Same spiritual language used to justify ungodly behavior.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

And I completely fell apart. The scar tore open. All the old trauma came flooding back. I had panic attacks in board meetings. I couldn't sleep. I dissociated during conversations. The wound I thought was healed was bleeding again.

I called my therapist in crisis: "I thought I'd healed this. Why is this happening? Did I do something wrong? Did I not really heal?"

Her response was instructive: "Jeff, scars can tear open. It doesn't mean you didn't heal the first time. It means you encountered something that stressed the healed tissue beyond what it could handle. Now you need to treat it again—not from scratch, but as a re-injury."

This is important to understand: **Scars tearing open doesn't mean you failed at healing. It means you encountered exceptional stress.**

Re-traumatization can happen when:

- You encounter a situation very similar to your original trauma
- You're under exceptional stress that lowers your resilience
- You haven't had time to fully develop strong scar tissue
- Multiple stressors hit at once
- You're isolated from support during a trigger event

When a scar tears open, here's what you do:

Don't shame yourself. This isn't failure. This is normal human response to exceptional stress. You're not weak. You're not broken. You're experiencing re-injury.

Treat it like a wound again. Go back to basics: therapy, support, self-care, boundaries, protective measures. Give it the same kind of attention you'd give a fresh wound.

Recognize it will heal faster than the original. Because you've done the work before, you know the path to healing. You have tools you didn't have the first time. The re-healing is usually faster than the original healing.

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Identify what triggered the re-traumatization. Understanding what caused the tear helps you protect against it in the future. Not avoidance—wisdom.

Get professional help immediately. Don't try to handle this alone. A torn scar is a crisis that requires professional support.

Adjust your circumstances if needed. Sometimes you need to remove yourself from the situation causing the re-traumatization. I had to step back from consulting with that particular church.

Trust the healing process again. You healed before. You can heal again. The capacity for healing hasn't left you.

After my scar tore open, it took about six months of intensive therapy to heal again. But it did heal. The scar reformed—and honestly, it's stronger now than it was before. I learned things from the re-injury that made my healing deeper.

Scars can tear. But they can also re-heal. And sometimes, the re-healing makes them stronger than they were before.

LIVING WITH YOUR SCARS

So what does it mean to live with scars? How do you navigate life as someone who bears permanent marks of trauma that's been healed but not erased?

Accept that scars are permanent. They don't disappear. They don't fade into nothing. They're part of you now. And that's okay.

Let your scars tell a story. When appropriate, share your scars as testimony. Not constantly, not to everyone, but when it serves others to know you've been wounded and healed.

Honor your scars with appropriate care. Just because they're healed doesn't mean they're indestructible. Protect tender scars. Maintain your healing practices. Stay connected to support.

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Don't let scars define you, but don't pretend they're not there. You're more than your trauma. But your trauma is part of your story. Both/and, not either/or.

Use your scars to serve others. The things you've survived equip you to help others survive similar wounds. Your scars are credentials for ministry to the wounded.

Remember Jesus kept His scars. The resurrected, glorified Christ still bears the marks of His crucifixion. Scars don't disqualify you from glory—they're evidence of what you've come through.

Celebrate the transformation. From wound to scar is a journey of grace. The fact that you've healed is worth celebrating, even if the scars remain.

I wear my physical scars openly now. I don't hide them. They tell stories about moments when I was brave, when I rescued someone, when I survived something that could have killed me.

And I'm learning to wear my soul scars with the same lack of shame. My father wounds? They've made me a better father to spiritual sons and daughters. My ministry trauma? It's made me a better chaplain to wounded ministers. My depression? It's made me able to sit with others in darkness without trying to rush them to light.

My scars are my story. And my story is one of wounding and healing, of trauma and grace, of wounds that became scars that became credentials for ministry.

That's not tragedy. That's redemption.

THE INVITATION TO INTEGRATION

The journey from wound to scar is the journey from brokenness to integration. It's not erasure. It's not denial. It's not "getting over it."

It's growing through it. It's allowing the wound to heal in such a way that it becomes part of your strength rather than your weakness. It's integrating the trauma into your narrative in a way that doesn't define you but does shape you.

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This is Part Three of our journey: Integration. Learning to live as people who've been wounded and healed. Learning to carry our scars without shame. Learning to minister from our scars rather than our wounds.

The process takes time. It requires proper treatment. It needs the right environment. It demands grace as foundation. But it's possible.

Your wounds can become scars. Your trauma can become testimony. Your pain can become purpose.

Not because the wounding was good—it wasn't. Not because you deserved it—you didn't. Not because God caused it—He didn't.

But because God is in the business of redemption. He specializes in taking broken things and making them whole. Not unchanged, but transformed. Not erased, but integrated. Not forgotten, but redeemed.

From wound to scar. From tragedy to testimony. From bleeding to bearing witness.

This is the invitation. This is the possibility. This is the hope.

Your wounds can heal. Your scars can serve. Your story can offer hope to others who are still bleeding from similar wounds.

It takes time. It requires work. It demands proper care.

But it's worth it.

Because scars tell a story. Not of defeat, but of survival. Not of weakness, but of the grace that makes healing possible. Not of tragedy, but of transformation.

Welcome to integration.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Looking at the wound-to-scar transformation stages, where are you with each of your major wounds? Are some still actively bleeding? Are others in early healing? Are any mature scars? What does "growing through it" rather than "getting over it" mean for your specific wounds? How does this reframe your healing journey? Which of your scars are tender? What makes them tender? How can you honor that tenderness without shame? Have any of your scars torn open through re-traumatization? What triggered it? What did you learn from the re-healing process? Jesus kept His scars in His glorified body. What does this tell you about your own scars? How does it change how you view your healed wounds? Where are you still trying to erase your story rather than integrate it? What would it look like to embrace your scars as part of your testimony? Henri Nouwen says the people who mean most to us are those who "share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand." Who has done this for you? How can you do this for others from your healed places? What scars are you ready to share as testimony? What scars still need more time before they can serve others? How do you discern the difference?

"Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." — John 20:27 (NASB)

Jesus kept His scars.

They didn't disqualify Him from glory.

They were evidence of what He'd been through and what He'd accomplished.

Your scars don't disqualify you either.

They're evidence of survival.

They're testimony of grace.

They're credentials for ministry.

From wound to scar.

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From bleeding to bearing witness.

From tragedy to testimony.

This is integration.

This is redemption.

This is the transformation that makes wounded healers possible.

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CHAPTER 9: Redeeming Your Story

I started Redeemed Furniture Co. in my garage not too long ago. It began as therapy, honestly—something to do with my hands while my head and heart were doing the hard work of healing. I'd find broken furniture at estate sales, thrift stores, curbsides. Pieces that most people saw as trash. Damaged beyond repair. Not worth the effort.

And I'd bring them home and restore them.

Not refinish them to look new—that would erase their story. But restore them—sand them down, repair the structural damage, strip away the cheap paint someone had slapped on to cover the problems, reveal the original wood, rebuild what was broken, and finish them in a way that honored both what they were and what they'd been through.

The tagline I put on my business cards was simple: "Making All Things New."

It's 2 Corinthians 5:17 theology applied to furniture. "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (NASB).

But here's what I learned through the furniture restoration process: **New doesn't mean the old is erased. New means the old is redeemed.**

When I restore a piece of furniture, you can still see its history. The grain of the wood tells a story—sometimes over a hundred years of story. The joints show evidence of repair. The patina reflects age and use. There might be minor imperfections that I choose to keep because they're part of the piece's character.

But it's transformed. What was broken is now functional. What was hidden under cheap paint now shows its true beauty. What was destined for the landfill now serves a purpose in someone's home.

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It's not a brand-new piece of furniture. It's a redeemed piece of furniture. And honestly? The redeemed pieces are more valuable, more beautiful, more meaningful than the new ones.

Because they have a story. And the story includes both the breaking and the restoration.

This is what God does with our stories. He doesn't erase them. He doesn't pretend the damage never happened. He doesn't slap a coat of religious paint over the brokenness and call it good.

He restores. He redeems. He takes what was broken and makes it functional again. He strips away the cheap covering and reveals the original beauty underneath. He repairs the structural damage. He refinishes in a way that honors both the original design and the redemptive process.

And when He's done, you're not a brand-new person with no history. You're a redeemed person whose history has been integrated into your identity in a way that makes you more valuable, more beautiful, more meaningful.

Your story—including the broken parts, the damaged chapters, the seasons you'd rather forget—is not your shame. It's your testimony. It's evidence of God's redemptive work. It's proof that He specializes in restoration, not disposal.

YOUR STORY IS NOT YOUR SHAME

For most of my adult life, I carried my story as shame. The childhood trauma? Shame. The failed ministry attempts? Shame. The depression and medication? Shame. The fractured relationships with my daughters? Profound shame.

I had two options for dealing with that shame, and I tried both:

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Option One: Hide the story. Don't talk about it. Minimize it when it comes up. Present a carefully curated version that leaves out the shameful parts. Perform wholeness while hiding brokenness.

This worked for a while. Until the hidden story started leaking out in unhealthy ways. Until the energy required to maintain the performance became unsustainable. Until the gap between my public image and my private reality became unbearable.

Option Two: Let the story define me. "I'm broken because of my childhood." "I'm damaged goods." "I'm the pastor who failed." "I'm the father who hurt his kids." Let the worst chapters become the whole narrative.

This felt more honest than hiding, but it was just as destructive. Because when your story becomes your identity, you stay stuck. You can't move forward because you're constantly looking back. You can't be transformed because you're defined by your brokenness.

Both options—hiding the story or being defined by it—treat your story as shame. The first says your story is too shameful to be known. The second says your story is so shameful it's all you'll ever be.

But there's a third option: **Redeeming the story.**

Redemption says: This happened. It's real. It's part of my story. It shaped me, wounded me, marked me. But it's not the whole story. It's not the final chapter. And it's not my identity.

Redemption says: The broken parts of my story are being woven into a larger narrative of grace, transformation, and hope.

Redemption says: My story is not my shame. My story is my testimony.

I learned this distinction through spiritual direction. I was processing my guilt over my failures as a father, and my spiritual director asked me a simple question: "Are you going to let this be the end of your story, or are you going to let this be a chapter in a longer story of redemption?"

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I sat with that for a long time. Because I'd been treating my failures as if they were the final word. As if "I hurt my daughters" was my identity, not an event in my story.

But she was right. This wasn't the end of my story. It was a painful chapter. A chapter I'd caused through my own choices and woundedness. A chapter that had real consequences. But still—a chapter, not the conclusion.

And God was writing a redemptive arc that didn't erase that chapter but transformed its meaning.

Your story is not your shame when you understand:

Your story includes both light and shadow. Every life includes both beautiful and terrible things. Both victory and failure. Both wounding and healing. The shadow doesn't cancel out the light. Both are real. Both are part of your story.

Your worst moments don't define you. You're more than your failures, your wounds, your darkest seasons. Those things are part of your story, but they're not your identity.

Redemption doesn't require erasing the past. God doesn't need you to pretend the bad things didn't happen. He needs you to bring them into His redeeming work so they can be transformed.

Your story can serve others. The chapters you're most ashamed of often become the chapters that help others most. Because other people are living those chapters right now, and your testimony gives them hope.

God's grace is bigger than your story. Whatever happened—whatever you did, whatever was done to you, whatever you've survived—God's grace is bigger. The worst chapters of your story aren't too big for redemption.

Frederick Buechner writes: "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid."

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Beautiful and terrible. Both/and, not either/or. Your story includes both. And neither the terrible things nor the beautiful things have the final word—God's redemption does.

Your story is not your shame. It's the raw material for God's redemptive work.

THE REDEMPTIVE ARC IN SCRIPTURE

One of the most powerful things I've learned is that the Bible is full of redeemed stories. People whose lives included terrible chapters that were woven into redemptive narratives.

Let me show you the pattern:

JOSEPH: Betrayal Redeemed

Joseph's story includes horrific betrayal. His brothers hated him, threw him in a pit, sold him into slavery, and let their father believe he was dead. Then Joseph was falsely accused of sexual assault and imprisoned for years.

That's his story. It's not pretty. It's not inspiring. It's traumatic.

But here's how Joseph tells the story years later, after God had redeemed it: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Genesis 50:20, NASB).

Notice what Joseph doesn't say: "It wasn't that bad." "I deserved it." "It was all part of God's plan so it was good." "I'm over it now."

He says: **You meant it for evil. It was evil. What you did was wrong. But God meant it for good.**

The evil doesn't become good. The betrayal doesn't become justified. The trauma doesn't become minimized. But the story gets redeemed. God weaves the terrible chapters into a larger narrative where they serve purposes the betrayers never intended.

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Joseph's story of betrayal became the story of how God preserved an entire nation through famine. The pit became the path to the palace. The prison became preparation for leadership. The betrayal became the means of salvation.

Redeemed. Not erased. Not justified. Redeemed.

DAVID: Adultery and Murder Redeemed

David's story includes heinous sin. He committed adultery with Bathsheba, then orchestrated her husband's murder to cover it up. It's not a minor failure—it's sexual sin, betrayal, and murder wrapped together.

That's his story. And it has real consequences—his child dies, his family fractures, rebellion and violence plague his household.

But it's not the end of his story.

David repents genuinely (Psalm 51). He accepts consequences. He does the work of facing what he's done. And God continues to work through him—David remains king, writes psalms that have ministered to billions of people across millennia, and his line continues to Jesus.

The sin doesn't disappear from his story. It's right there in the biblical narrative. But it's not the defining chapter. David is remembered as "a man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14)—not because he was perfect, but because when he failed, he genuinely repented and let God redeem even his worst choices.

Redeemed. Not hidden. Not excused. Redeemed.

PETER: Denial Redeemed

Peter's story includes spectacular failure. After promising he'd never deny Jesus, he denied Him three times—with curses and oaths—while Jesus was on trial for His life. It's cowardice, betrayal, failure at the moment that mattered most.

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That's his story. And it's part of the biblical record forever.

But after the resurrection, Jesus doesn't shame Peter or disqualify him. Instead, Jesus restores him. Three denials, three affirmations: "Do you love me?" "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

And Peter becomes a foundational leader in the early church. His Pentecost sermon launches the Christian movement. His letters encourage believers for two thousand years. His leadership shapes the church's early development.

The denial is still in his story. But it's not the conclusion. It's a chapter of failure followed by chapters of restoration, service, and sacrifice (church tradition says Peter was eventually crucified for his faith).

Redeemed. Not deleted. Not ignored. Redeemed.

PAUL: Persecution Redeemed

Paul's story includes being a violent persecutor of Christians. He didn't just disagree with them—he actively worked to destroy the church, dragged believers to prison, and stood by approving as Stephen was stoned to death.

That's his story. It's not background noise—it's violent opposition to God's people.

But after his encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road, Paul becomes the most influential apostle in church history. He plants churches throughout the Roman Empire. He writes much of the New Testament. He takes the gospel to the Gentiles.

And he never hides his past. He refers to himself as "the least of the apostles" and "not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Corinthians 15:9, NASB). His past isn't erased—it's part of his testimony of God's transforming grace.

Redeemed. Not justified. Not minimized. Redeemed.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

THE PATTERN:

Do you see it? The biblical pattern of redemption doesn't erase the terrible chapters. It doesn't pretend they didn't happen. It doesn't minimize the damage or justify the evil.

It says: **This happened. It was real. It was terrible. And God is weaving even this into a larger story of redemption.**

Joseph's betrayal preserved nations. David's adultery led to genuine repentance and psalms that still minister. Peter's denial was followed by restoration and faithful leadership. Paul's persecution made him the apostle to the Gentiles.

Not because the evil was good. Not because the sin was okay. But because God specializes in redemption.

And if He can redeem those stories—betrayal, murder, denial, persecution—He can redeem yours.

INTEGRATING YOUR PAST INTO YOUR PRESENT MINISTRY

So how do you actually integrate your past into your present ministry? How do you let your redeemed story inform your service without being defined by it?

This is where many people get stuck. They swing between two extremes:

Extreme One: Constantly referencing your past. Every sermon includes your testimony. Every conversation mentions your struggle. Every ministry opportunity is framed through your story. Your past becomes your brand.

Extreme Two: Never mentioning your past. You minister as if you have no story. You never share struggles. You present as if you've always been whole. Your past is completely separate from your present.

Both are problematic. The first makes your story into performance. The second makes your ministry inauthentic.

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Integration means: Your redeemed story informs your ministry without defining it.

Let me show you what this looks like in practice:

With my father wounds:

NOT integrated: "My father wounded me, so I understand everyone who has daddy issues, and let me tell you about my childhood trauma every time we talk about relationships with God as Father."

Integrated: I have deep compassion for people with father wounds because I carry those wounds myself. When counseling someone struggling to see God as loving Father, I can say, "I understand—I've struggled with that too because of my own father relationship. Here's what's helped me..." And then I share selectively, appropriately, in service of their healing.

With my ministry trauma:

NOT integrated: "I was betrayed by church leadership, so I don't trust churches, and you shouldn't either. Let me tell you about everything they did to me."

Integrated: I'm appropriately cautious in church contexts because of past betrayal. When mentoring young pastors, I can help them recognize red flags in board dynamics because I learned the hard way. I share my story when it serves their growth, not to process my own pain.

With my depression:

NOT integrated: "I struggle with depression, so I'm on medication, and let me tell you about my mental health journey every time someone mentions feeling sad."

Integrated: I'm open about mental health struggles when appropriate. When someone admits they're depressed, I can say, "I've been there. Have you talked to a doctor? Medication and therapy literally saved my life." I normalize mental health care without making my story the focus.

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The principles of healthy integration:

- 1. Discernment about when to share.** Not every conversation needs your full story. Ask: Will sharing this serve the other person? Or am I sharing to process my own stuff?
- 2. Appropriate detail level.** Share enough to connect and offer hope, not so much that it becomes about you or re-traumatizes the listener.
- 3. Emphasis on redemption, not trauma.** The point isn't the wounding—it's the healing. Don't leave people with the horror story; lead them to the hope.
- 4. Focus on the other person, not yourself.** Your story is in service of their healing, not your need to be heard or validated.
- 5. Context matters.** What's appropriate in a support group might not be appropriate from the pulpit. What works in one-on-one counseling might not work in a team meeting.
- 6. Your story is one tool, not the only tool.** Sometimes your story is helpful. Sometimes Scripture, theology, or someone else's story serves better. Don't force your story into every situation.
- 7. Ongoing healing matters.** You can share about wounds that have become scars. You can't healthily minister from wounds that are still actively bleeding.

I learned this through trial and error. Early in my recovery from burnout, I shared my story way too much, in inappropriate contexts, with too much detail. I was processing through public sharing, which put my wounding on others.

My therapist helped me see it: "Your story can serve others, but only when it's genuinely healed enough that you're sharing for them, not for you."

That was convicting. Because I'd been using ministry as therapy, using people's problems as opportunities to process my own.

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Now, I'm much more discerning. I ask myself:

- Is this healed enough that I can share without bleeding on them?
- Will sharing this actually help them?
- Is this the right context?
- Am I sharing to serve them or to get something from them?

My story is integrated into my ministry, but it doesn't dominate it. It informs my compassion, shapes my approach, gives me credibility—but it's not the main thing. Christ is the main thing. Grace is the main thing. The person I'm serving is the main thing.

My story is the supporting evidence that grace really does redeem, not the central message itself.

FINDING MEANING IN SUFFERING WITHOUT GLORIFYING IT

This is a critical distinction: **You can find meaning in suffering without glorifying the suffering itself.**

Our culture—and especially Christian culture—often gets this wrong. We try to make suffering "worth it" by finding some silver lining, some blessing in disguise, some hidden gift.

"God gave you cancer to teach you patience." "Your child died so you could minister to grieving parents." "You were abused so you'd be more compassionate." "Your marriage fell apart so you'd understand brokenness."

This is toxic theology. It makes God into a cosmic sadist who inflicts suffering for our benefit. It glorifies suffering by making it necessary, purposeful, even good.

But suffering is not good. Evil is not good. Trauma is not good. Loss is not good.

Suffering is suffering. Evil is evil. And God didn't cause it to teach you something.

Tim Keller gets this right: "Suffering is unbearable if you aren't certain that God is for you and with you."

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God is *for* you and *with* you *in* your suffering. He's not causing it. He's not using it as a teaching tool. He's grieving it with you and working to redeem it.

There's a massive difference between:

Glorifying suffering: "God gave me this wound so I'd be more useful to Him."

Finding meaning in redeemed suffering: "This wound happened (through evil, brokenness, human failure—not God's design). God didn't cause it. But God is redeeming it. And in His redemption, I'm finding meaning I wouldn't have found otherwise."

Let me show you the difference with my own story:

GLORIFYING SUFFERING (wrong): "God wounded me through my father so I'd become a better minister. My childhood trauma was God's plan to shape me for chaplaincy. I'm grateful for the abuse because it made me who I am."

No. Hell no. The abuse was evil. It damaged me. It wasn't God's plan—it was the result of my father's woundedness and sin. And I'm not grateful for it.

FINDING MEANING IN REDEEMED SUFFERING (right): "I was wounded by my father. That wound wasn't God's doing—it was the result of broken humanity, generational trauma, my father's unhealed wounds. God didn't cause it. But God has been redeeming it. Through the process of healing, I've developed compassion for others with father wounds. I've learned about grace in ways I might not have if I'd had a healthy father. I've become a better minister to broken people because I know what it's like to be broken. God is making something redemptive out of what was destructive—not because the destruction was good, but because God specializes in redemption."

See the difference?

The first makes the suffering itself good and necessary. The second acknowledges the suffering as evil while recognizing God's redemptive work through it.

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Romans 8:28 (NASB) says: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

This is often misunderstood. It doesn't say all things are good. It doesn't say God causes all things. It says God *works all things together* for good.

All things—including terrible, evil, traumatic things—are being woven by God into a larger redemptive narrative. He's not causing the terrible things. He's not making them good. He's working to bring good even out of evil.

This means:

You can acknowledge the real evil of what happened without having to find a way to make it okay.

You can grieve the real loss without having to spiritual-bypass it with "but God had a reason."

You can be angry at the injustice without having to justify it as "part of God's plan."

You can call abuse abuse, trauma trauma, evil evil without having to find the silver lining.

And ALSO:

You can trust that God is working redemption even though He didn't cause the destruction.

You can find meaning in your suffering without glorifying the suffering itself.

You can let your pain serve a purpose without having to say the pain was purposeful.

You can see how God has brought good out of evil without saying the evil was good.

This is the redemptive narrative: **The suffering was real and terrible. God is making something redemptive out of it. Both are true.**

THE WOUNDED HEALER

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REDEMPTION AND ERASURE

I need to be very clear about something: **Redemption is not erasure.**

God doesn't redeem your story by making the bad chapters disappear. He doesn't redeem by hitting "undo" on your trauma. He doesn't redeem by giving you amnesia about your wounds.

He redeems by transforming the meaning of those chapters without erasing them.

Think about furniture restoration again: When I restore a piece, I don't make it look brand new. I don't hide its history. I don't pretend it's something it's not.

I reveal its history. I honor its age. I preserve evidence of its journey. But I transform it so that its history becomes part of its beauty rather than its shame.

A properly restored antique shows its age—and that's what makes it valuable. The patina, the grain, the minor imperfections tell a story. If I tried to make it look factory-new, I'd destroy its value and character.

The same is true for your story.

Erasure says:

- Forget the past
- It didn't happen
- Move on like it never existed
- Start fresh with no history
- Be a new person with no connection to the old one

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Redemption says:

- Remember the past honestly
- It happened and it matters
- Move forward carrying your story
- Start from where you are, history included
- Be a transformed person whose history is integrated

God's redemption doesn't erase your story. It doesn't give you a different past. It doesn't pretend the terrible things didn't happen.

God's redemption transforms your relationship to your story.

Before redemption:

- Your story is your shame
- Your past defines you
- Your wounds control you
- Your trauma has the final word

After redemption:

- Your story is your testimony
- Your past informs you but doesn't define you
- Your scars equip you
- Grace has the final word

Same story. Different meaning.

I'm still a man whose father wounded him. That hasn't changed. The wounding still happened. The damage was real.

But that's not all I am. I'm also a man who's experienced God's healing grace. Who's done the hard work of therapy and spiritual direction. Who's let those wounds become scars. Who's using those scars to serve others.

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The wounding is part of my story. So is the healing. Both are true. Both are permanent parts of my narrative.

That's redemption. Not erasure.

WRITING EXERCISE: CRAFTING YOUR REDEMPTIVE NARRATIVE

Now I'm going to ask you to do something difficult but essential: Write your redemptive narrative.

This isn't a public testimony. This is for you—a way of integrating your story, seeing the redemptive arc, claiming your narrative as testimony rather than shame.

PART ONE: THE CHAPTERS

Divide your life into chapters. Not based on arbitrary time periods, but based on significant seasons or events. Give each chapter a title that honestly reflects what it was.

For example, mine might look like:

1. "The Unseen Boy" (Childhood with emotionally absent father)
2. "Finding Purpose in Fire" (Firefighting career)
3. "The Calling" (Early ministry)
4. "Building on Sand" (Church planting attempt)
5. "The Collapse" (Ministry failure and breakdown)
6. "In the Wilderness" (Depression, therapy, healing)
7. "Reconstruction" (Finding new ministry identity)
8. "The Ragamuffin Pastor" (Current ministry from healed places)

Your chapters will be different. But be honest. Don't sanitize. Don't perform. This is for you.

PART TWO: THE HONEST ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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For each difficult chapter, write a paragraph that honestly acknowledges:

- What happened
- How it wounded you
- What was lost or damaged
- The real consequences
- Why it was terrible

Don't minimize. Don't spiritual-bypass. Don't rush to the redemption yet. Sit with the truth of how bad it actually was.

For "The Collapse" chapter, mine would read: "I hit rock bottom. My church plant failed. My marriage was fracturing. My relationships with my daughters were damaged. I was clinically depressed and having suicidal thoughts. I couldn't function in ministry. I couldn't pray. I felt abandoned by God and betrayed by the people I'd served. Everything I'd built my identity on—being strong, being useful, being the rescuer—crumbled. I was forced to face that I couldn't save myself and that my ministry success had been built on my woundedness rather than on God's calling."

That's honest acknowledgment. It doesn't skip to "but God had a plan." It sits with how terrible it was.

PART THREE: THE REDEMPTIVE MOVEMENT

Now, for each difficult chapter, write another paragraph about how God is redeeming it. Not how He caused it or why it was good, but how He's transforming it.

What healing has happened? What have you learned? How has it changed you? How are you using it to serve others? What meaning are you finding in it?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

For "The Collapse" chapter: "God met me in the darkness when I couldn't find Him. Therapy and medication saved my life and taught me that mental health care is healthcare, not spiritual failure. Spiritual direction helped me see that my ministry had been driven by wounds, and collapsing was necessary for me to rebuild on grace instead of performance. The failure forced me to separate my identity from my productivity. The depression taught me compassion for others in darkness. The breakdown became a breakthrough—not because the breakdown was good, but because God used even that to transform me. I learned that I'm loved as a broken person, not just as a useful one. And that's become the foundation for everything I do now in chaplaincy and recovery ministry."

See the difference? I'm not saying the collapse was good. I'm saying God is redeeming it.

PART FOUR: THE CURRENT CHAPTER

Write about where you are now. What chapter are you in? How are the previous chapters informing this one?

For me: "I'm in 'The Ragamuffin Pastor' chapter now. I serve as a chaplain to first responders and municipal employees, run recovery programs for codependents, plant a church for people wounded by religion, and restore furniture as a side ministry. All of these are directly informed by my redeemed story. My father wounds make me compassionate to others with authority issues. My ministry failures make me gentle with pastors in crisis. My depression makes me effective in crisis intervention. My recovery from codependency equips me to help others heal. I'm not despite my wounds—I'm useful because of how God has redeemed them."

PART FIVE: THE REDEMPITIVE THEME

Looking at your whole story, what's the redemptive theme? What's the thread that runs through it all?

For me, it's this: "God meets broken people in their brokenness and redeems them—not by making them unbroken, but by transforming their relationship to their brokenness."

What's yours?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

PART SIX: THE ONE-SENTENCE TESTIMONY

Boil it all down to one sentence—your redemptive narrative in its simplest form.

Mine: **"I'm a broken man learning to minister from healed places rather than open wounds, discovering that God's grace is most visible through redeemed humanity."**

Write yours.

LIVING YOUR REDEEMED STORY

Once you've crafted your redemptive narrative, the question is: How do you live it?

Claim it without shame. Your story is your story. The terrible chapters happened. The redemption is real. Own both without shame.

Share it selectively. Not everyone needs to know every detail. Share what serves the moment, the person, the purpose.

Keep writing it. Your story isn't finished. New chapters are being written. Stay engaged in your ongoing healing and growth.

Let it inform, not define. Your past informs your present, but it doesn't dictate your future. You're not trapped in your story—you're empowered by it.

Point to the Redeemer, not the story. Your story is powerful, but it's not the point. Jesus is the point. Grace is the point. Your story is evidence of what Jesus does.

Stay humble. Redemption doesn't make you superior to people whose stories haven't been redeemed yet. You're not further along spiritually—you're just further along in your specific healing journey.

Celebrate the transformation. You've come through things that could have destroyed you. That's worth celebrating. Not the wounding, but the healing. Not the trauma, but the redemption.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Frederick Buechner's words echo in my mind: "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid."

Beautiful and terrible. Your story includes both. And neither has the final word.

God's redemption does.

Your story is not your shame. It's your testimony. It's evidence that God specializes in restoration, not disposal. That He takes broken things and makes them beautiful again—not by hiding the cracks, but by filling them with grace.

Redeemed. Not erased. Not hidden. Not minimized.

Redeemed.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Complete the writing exercise: What are the chapters of your life? What would you honestly title each one? Don't sanitize—be truthful. Which chapters are you still carrying as shame rather than as redeemed story? What keeps you from seeing them through the lens of redemption? Looking at the biblical examples (Joseph, David, Peter, Paul), which one resonates most with your story? Why? What do you learn from how God redeemed their narrative? Where are you tempted to glorify your suffering rather than simply finding meaning in it? How does reframing this change your relationship to your story? What's the difference between redemption and erasure in your story? What are you trying to erase that actually needs to be redeemed? Write your one-sentence redemptive narrative. How does seeing your whole story through this lens change how you view your past? How is your redeemed story currently integrated into your ministry? Are you sharing too much, too little, or in healthy, appropriate ways? Frederick Buechner says, "Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid." What beautiful and terrible things make up your story? How is God redeeming both?

"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive." — Genesis 50:20 (NASB)

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Your story includes chapters that were meant for evil.

People who wounded you. Circumstances that broke you. Trauma that damaged you. Loss that devastated you.

That's real. That's true. That's part of your story.

But God is at work meaning it for good.

Not making it good. Not calling it good. Not justifying it.

But redeeming it.

Taking what was meant to destroy you and transforming it into something that can preserve life—yours and others'.

Your story is not your shame.

It's your testimony.

Redeemed. Restored. Re-purposed.

Not erased. But transformed.

Making all things new.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 10: The Crucified Minister

In the center of heaven, at the throne of the Most High God, surrounded by angels and elders and living creatures, stands a Lamb. Not a conquering lion. Not a triumphant warrior. Not an unblemished king.

A Lamb. Slain.

"And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain" (Revelation 5:6, NASB).

This image has haunted me for years. The glorified Christ—risen, victorious, exalted, worthy of all worship—bears the marks of His wounds. Forever. Eternally. In His glorified state.

The Lamb wasn't slain in the past tense and now exists as unmarked. The Lamb is standing "as if slain"—present tense, continuous state. The scars remain. The wounds are visible. The evidence of crucifixion marks the body of the risen Lord.

This changes everything about how I understand wounds, scars, and ministry.

Because if Jesus in His glorified state bears the marks of His wounding, then maybe—just maybe—my scars aren't something to be ashamed of. Maybe they're not disqualifications from glory. Maybe they're credentials for ministry.

Maybe the wounded healer isn't a consolation prize for those who couldn't avoid getting hurt. Maybe the wounded healer is the biblical pattern, modeled by Christ Himself.

The cross is the ultimate picture of how woundedness becomes redemptive. Not woundedness alone—that's just trauma. Not victory without woundedness—that's just triumphalism. But woundedness *redeemed*, wounds *transformed*, suffering *resurrected*.

Jesus doesn't minister in spite of His wounds. He ministers through them, from them, with them. His wounds become the source of healing for others. His scars become His credentials. His suffering becomes the means of salvation.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

And if we're going to be ministers who heal rather than wound, we need to understand this pattern. We need to see how Jesus transforms suffering into redemption. We need to learn the difference between dying to self and destroying self. We need to grasp how the cross becomes the pattern for all redemptive ministry.

Because you can't understand the wounded healer without understanding the Crucified Christ.

KENOSIS: THE SELF-EMPTYING OF CHRIST

The theological term is *kenosis*—from the Greek word meaning "to empty." And it's the key to understanding how Jesus modeled redemptive woundedness.

Philippians 2:5-11 (NASB) is one of the most profound passages in all of Scripture:

"Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Let me break this down, because it's the pattern for everything we've been talking about:

He existed in the form of God. Jesus was fully divine. Equal with God. Possessing all the attributes, power, and glory of deity. This is His starting point—not just human, but God Himself.

He didn't regard equality with God as something to be grasped. He didn't cling to His divine privileges. He didn't hold tightly to His position, His power, His prerogatives. He was willing to release them.

He emptied Himself. *Kenosis*. He poured Himself out. He laid aside His divine privileges (not His divine nature—He remained fully God—but His divine prerogatives). He chose limitation. He chose vulnerability. He chose to become dependent rather than remaining in independent power.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

He took the form of a servant. Not just human—servant. The lowest position. The most vulnerable role. Complete identification with those He came to serve.

He humbled Himself. Even from the position of human servant, He went lower. He chose obedience. He chose submission. He chose the path of suffering rather than the path of power.

Even to death on a cross. The ultimate humiliation. The most shameful, painful, degrading form of execution Rome could devise. God Himself chose this. Not as victim, but as willing participant in redemptive suffering.

Therefore God highly exalted Him. The resurrection. The ascension. The glorification. Not instead of the cross, but *through* the cross. Not avoiding suffering, but transforming it. Exaltation comes through—not around—humiliation.

This is the pattern. And it's radically different from what we usually think about strength, power, and ministry.

The world's pattern: Hold onto power. Avoid suffering. Climb the ladder. Assert dominance. Protect yourself. Never show weakness.

The kenosis pattern: Release power. Enter suffering. Descend the ladder. Choose service. Make yourself vulnerable. Strength is perfected through weakness.

Jürgen Moltmann, the German theologian who wrote extensively on the crucified God, captures this powerfully:

"God is not greater than He is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than He is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than He is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than He is in this humanity."

Read that again. Let it sink in.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

God's greatest glory is in the humiliation of the cross. God's truest power is in the helplessness of crucifixion. God's most authentic divinity is in His humanity.

This overturns everything we think we know about strength and weakness, power and vulnerability, glory and shame.

And it means that **ministry modeled on Jesus will look like kenosis—self-emptying, not self-promotion. Descending, not climbing. Serving, not dominating. Becoming vulnerable, not protecting yourself.**

But—and this is critical—**kenosis is not self-destruction.**

DYING TO SELF VS. DESTROYING SELF

I need to be very clear about this because it's where so many ministers get wrecked: **Dying to self is not the same as destroying self.**

Jesus' kenosis was self-emptying, not self-annihilation. He laid aside His privileges, not His personhood. He chose limitation, not elimination. He embraced suffering for redemptive purposes, not as punishment or as evidence that He deserved to be destroyed.

But in ministry culture, we often confuse these things. We think:

- Dying to self means never having needs
- Self-emptying means working until you collapse
- Becoming a servant means letting people abuse you
- Taking up your cross means accepting toxic treatment
- Following Jesus means destroying yourself for ministry

This is not kenosis. This is just destruction.

Let me show you the difference:

THE WOUNDED HEALER

DYING TO SELF (Kenosis - Healthy):

What it is: Releasing your right to be served in order to serve others. Choosing to put others' legitimate needs ahead of your preferences (not your needs). Laying down power for redemptive purposes.

What it looks like:

- Jesus washing the disciples' feet (John 13)
- Setting aside personal comfort to meet genuine needs
- Choosing service when you could choose dominance
- Using your power to empower others rather than control them
- Embracing suffering that serves a redemptive purpose
- Making yourself vulnerable to show others how to be human

What it requires:

- Agency—you're choosing this
- Purpose—there's a redemptive reason
- Boundaries—you know what's yours to give and what's not
- Self-awareness—you're doing this from strength, not weakness
- Support—you have resources to sustain this
- Wisdom—you know when to stop

Key principle: You're giving something you have for a purpose that matters.

DESTROYING SELF (Toxic - Unhealthy):

What it is: Believing you have no right to exist unless you're useful. Sacrificing your wellbeing because you believe you're worthless. Allowing abuse because you think you deserve it. Working yourself to death to earn love or approval.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

What it looks like:

- Working 80-hour weeks until you collapse
- Accepting abuse from congregation or leadership
- Never saying no because you believe your needs don't matter
- Sacrificing your family for ministry without boundaries
- Ignoring your mental/physical health until you break
- Believing your worth is in your usefulness

What it requires:

- Woundedness—you're operating from unhealed trauma
- Shame—you believe you don't deserve care
- No boundaries—you can't distinguish your needs from others' demands
- Performance—you're trying to earn what should be given freely
- Isolation—you have no one protecting you from exploitation
- Compulsion—you can't stop even when it's destroying you

Key principle: You're destroying something you need because you believe you're worthless.

Jesus' kenosis was the first. Much of ministry burnout is the second.

Jesus chose limitation *from a position of power*. He had all authority and chose to lay it down. He was secure in His identity as God's beloved Son. He knew His mission. He had boundaries (He withdrew to pray, He said no to demands, He rested). He had support (disciples, friends, His relationship with the Father). He chose when to give and when to withdraw.

His self-emptying was an act of strength, not weakness. Of love, not obligation. Of purpose, not compulsion.

When ministers destroy themselves, they're not following Jesus' example—they're following their wounds. They're not dying to self—they're acting out their shame. They're not taking up their cross—they're crucifying themselves on the altar of performance and approval.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The cross Jesus calls us to carry is the one He chose for redemptive purposes. It's not the cross of unhealed wounding, toxic systems, or self-destruction.

I learned this distinction the hard way. For years, I thought ministry martyrdom was faithfulness. I worked myself to exhaustion, accepted treatment I never should have accepted, sacrificed my family on the altar of ministry success, and called it "dying to self."

It wasn't. It was destroying myself. Operating from my father wounds, trying to earn worth through usefulness, believing that love was contingent on my performance.

My therapist asked me a devastating question: "When Jesus emptied Himself, was it because He believed He was worthless? Or was it because He knew His worth and chose to give Himself for purposes that mattered?"

The answer was obvious. Jesus didn't empty Himself because He thought He deserved nothing. He emptied Himself because He knew His identity was secure and He was choosing redemptive suffering.

True kenosis comes from security, not shame. From strength, not woundedness. From love, not obligation.

If you're destroying yourself in ministry, you're not following Jesus. You're following your wounds. And you need to stop, get help, and learn the difference between redemptive suffering and self-destruction.

THE SCANDAL OF A SCARRED SAVIOR

When Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, He still bore His wounds.

Thomas needed proof. He'd heard the reports that Jesus was alive, but he couldn't believe it. "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe" (John 20:25, NASB).

Eight days later, Jesus appeared to Thomas: "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing" (John 20:27, NASB).

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The risen Christ—victorious over death, triumphant over sin, glorified in resurrection—invited Thomas to touch His wounds.

This is scandalous.

Think about it: Jesus could have been resurrected with an unblemished body. He could have appeared in a form that showed no evidence of crucifixion. He could have demonstrated victory by erasing all signs of suffering.

But He didn't.

He kept His scars.

Why?

His scars authenticated His resurrection. Without the wounds, the disciples wouldn't have known this was the same Jesus who was crucified. The scars proved continuity—this wasn't a different person, this was the crucified one, now risen.

His scars demonstrated that He truly died. The wounds were evidence that the death was real. Not a swoon. Not an illusion. Real death, real suffering, real crucifixion.

His scars showed that resurrection doesn't mean erasure. The risen life doesn't delete the crucified life. Resurrection doesn't pretend the cross didn't happen. It transforms the meaning of the cross without erasing it.

His scars became His credentials. In Revelation, the Lamb who was slain is worthy to open the scroll *because* He was slain. His wounds are His qualifications. His suffering is His authority.

His scars remain forever. This isn't temporary. In heaven, for eternity, Jesus bears the marks of His earthly wounding. The glorified Christ is the scarred Christ.

This changes how I understand my own scars.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

For years, I thought the goal was to get past my wounds so completely that there'd be no evidence they ever existed. I wanted to be healed to the point where you couldn't tell I'd been wounded. I wanted ministry credentials that came from strength, not from survival.

But Jesus keeps His scars. And those scars are central to His identity, His ministry, His worthiness to be worshiped.

Maybe my scars aren't meant to disappear. Maybe they're meant to be transformed from sources of shame into sources of ministry. Maybe the goal isn't to pretend I was never wounded but to let my wounds—healed into scars—become credentials for serving other wounded people.

The scandal is this: The God of the universe, in His glorified state, bears the marks of wounding. Forever.

That means:

- Woundedness is not incompatible with glory
- Scars don't disqualify you from worship
- Your healed wounds are part of your identity, not separate from it
- Ministry from scars is the biblical pattern, not the exception

You don't have to pretend you were never wounded. You don't have to hide your scars. You don't have to achieve some mythical state of unwoundedness before you can serve.

You just have to let your wounds heal into scars and then let those scars tell the story of redemption.

HOW JESUS' WOUNDS AUTHENTICATE HIS MINISTRY

Jesus' earthly ministry was marked by His identification with the wounded.

He touched lepers—making Himself unclean by their standards, taking on their stigma.

He dined with tax collectors and sinners—associating with the socially rejected, absorbing their shame.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

He healed on the Sabbath—prioritizing human need over religious rules, accepting the cost of religious disapproval.

He wept with the grieving—entering their pain without immediately fixing it, bearing witness to their suffering.

He welcomed children—honoring the powerless when His culture dismissed them.

He spoke to the Samaritan woman—breaking cultural barriers that said she was unworthy of His attention.

His entire ministry was about entering woundedness, not maintaining distance from it.

And then, in the ultimate act of identification, He became wounded Himself. Betrayed. Abandoned. Beaten. Mocked. Crucified.

The wounds weren't just something that happened *to* Jesus on His way to resurrection. The wounds were *central* to His mission. "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15, NASB).

He can sympathize because He experienced it. He can minister to the wounded because He Himself was wounded.

And after resurrection, His wounds continue to authenticate His ministry:

His wounds prove He understands suffering. He's not a God who stayed distant from pain. He entered it fully.

His wounds give Him credibility with the broken. We can trust Him because He knows what it's like to be broken.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

His wounds demonstrate the cost of love. Love that doesn't cost anything isn't love. His scars are proof of how much He loved.

His wounds show that redemption is real. If He can be resurrected still bearing His scars, then our scars don't disqualify us from resurrection either.

This is the pattern for ministry: **Authenticity comes from shared experience, not from untouched superiority.**

The minister who's never struggled can't really minister to strugglers. The leader who's never failed can't really understand failure. The counselor who's never been broken can't really sit with brokenness.

But the minister whose wounds have healed into scars? That person can minister authentically. Not by pretending to be invulnerable, but by demonstrating that healing is possible.

Henri Nouwen understood this: "The great challenge is living your wounds through instead of thinking them through."

You can't minister from wounds you've only theorized about. You have to live through them. Feel them. Process them. Heal from them. Let them become scars.

And then—only then—can those scars authenticate your ministry to others who are still wounded.

THE CROSS AS PATTERN FOR REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING

So if the cross is the pattern, what does redemptive suffering actually look like for ministers?

Let me be clear about what it's *not*:

THE WOUNDED HEALER

NOT redemptive suffering:

- Accepting abuse from church leadership
- Working yourself into burnout for ministry success
- Sacrificing your family on the altar of church growth
- Staying in toxic ministry environments because "you're called"
- Allowing boundary violations because "servants don't have rights"
- Ignoring your mental/physical health for ministry demands

This isn't redemptive suffering. This is just suffering. And it's not redemptive—it's destructive.

Jesus' suffering was redemptive because:

- **It had a purpose:** Salvation for humanity
- **It was chosen:** He had the power to avoid it but chose it
- **It was limited:** Three hours on the cross, then resurrection
- **It accomplished something:** Reconciliation between God and humanity
- **It ended:** Death was not the final word
- **It was unique to His calling:** We're not called to die for the sins of the world—He already did that

Redemptive suffering for ministers looks like:

Choosing vulnerability when you could choose self-protection. Sharing your struggles when it would serve others to know they're not alone. Being honest about your process when performing wholeness would be easier.

Entering others' pain when you could stay comfortable. Sitting with someone in their darkness when you'd rather give quick answers. Bearing witness to suffering without trying to fix it immediately.

Accepting limitations that come with humanity. Acknowledging you can't do everything, save everyone, meet every need. Releasing the messiah complex and accepting your actual capacity.

Embracing the cost of integrity. Speaking truth when it would be easier to stay silent. Confronting injustice when it would be safer to go along. Maintaining your values even when it costs you position or approval.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Letting your healed wounds inform your ministry. Using your scars to help others. Sharing your story when it serves redemptive purposes. Allowing your past suffering to create compassion for present suffering in others.

Accepting that transformation requires death of the false self. Letting go of the performance-driven identity. Releasing the need to be seen as superhuman. Dying to the impostor so the beloved can emerge.

The pattern is this: Redemptive suffering is *chosen for purpose, serves others, has boundaries, and leads to resurrection.*

If your suffering doesn't have these characteristics, it's not redemptive—it's just destructive. And you don't have to keep choosing it.

LIVING AS CRUCIFIED MINISTERS

So what does it mean to be a "crucified minister"? How do we live out this pattern in actual ministry?

It means embracing weakness as the context for God's power. Not performing strength you don't have, but being honest about your limitations and trusting God's power to work through them.

Paul understood this: "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10, NASB).

When I'm weak—genuinely, honestly weak—then God's power shows most clearly. Because no one can credit my strength. It has to be God.

It means death to the false self precedes resurrection of the true self. The performance-driven, approval-seeking, wound-driven version of you has to die. It's painful. It feels like loss. But it's necessary for the authentic, grace-based, healed version of you to emerge.

I had to let my "firefighter-pastor-superhero" identity die before my "ragamuffin-minister" identity could be born. The death felt like failure. But it was actually liberation.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

It means your scars become your ministry credentials. Not your degrees, not your success record, not your unblemished reputation—your healed wounds. Your survival of things that could have destroyed you. Your testimony of grace in the midst of brokenness.

When I sit with a depressed pastor, my credentials aren't my seminary degrees. They're the fact that I've been in that dark place and survived. When I counsel someone healing from ministry trauma, my authority comes from my own scars.

It means embracing kenosis—choosing to descend rather than climb. In a culture obsessed with platform, influence, and success, choosing to serve rather than be served. Choosing the lowest place rather than demanding recognition. Choosing to empower others rather than controlling them.

This is countercultural. This is counterintuitive. This gets you labeled as lacking ambition or not reaching your potential.

But it's the Jesus pattern.

It means staying present to suffering rather than fixing or avoiding it. Both your own suffering and others'. Not rushing to resurrection. Not spiritual bypassing. Not performing triumph you don't feel. Just being present, honest, human in the midst of pain.

It means trusting resurrection without demanding it on your timeline. Death comes before resurrection. The tomb comes before the empty tomb. Holy Saturday—the day between death and resurrection when nothing seems to be happening—is part of the pattern.

You can't skip to resurrection. You have to go through death. Through the tomb. Through the waiting.

But resurrection does come. Just not always when or how you expect.

MEDITATION: CONTEMPLATING CHRIST'S WOUNDS AS ONGOING MINISTRY

I want to invite you into a contemplative practice. Find a quiet place. Give yourself ten minutes without distraction.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Close your eyes and picture the resurrected Christ. Not the gentle Jesus of children's books. Not the sanitized savior of religious art. The actual risen Christ—bearing the marks of crucifixion.

See His hands. The nail wounds are still there. Holes straight through. In His glorified state, He could touch you with those hands, and you'd feel the scars.

What do those scars tell you about His ministry to you? About how He understands your wounds?

See His side. Where the spear pierced. Where blood and water flowed. Where Thomas could put his hand. Still open. Still visible.

What does that wound tell you about vulnerability? About being opened up? About letting others see your deepest places?

See His feet. Nailed to the cross. Bearing the weight of His body. Now standing, walking, moving—but marked.

What do those scars tell you about the journey? About carrying marks of your path? About transformation that doesn't erase history?

See His head. Where the crown of thorns pressed in. Where mockery met divinity. Where He was crowned with suffering before being crowned with glory.

What do those wounds tell you about shame transformed? About mockery redeemed? About pain that precedes glory?

Now imagine He's looking at you. With eyes that see your wounds. Your scars. Your unhealed places. Your shame. Your brokenness.

And He's not horrified. He's not disappointed. He's not disgusted.

He understands. Because He's been there. He bears the marks.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Listen to what He might say to you:

"Your wounds don't disqualify you. Mine didn't disqualify Me."

"Your scars can become credentials. Mine did."

"Resurrection doesn't erase wounding. It transforms it."

"You don't have to pretend to be unwounded. I don't."

"Your brokenness doesn't shock Me. Look at My hands."

"Healing is possible. But the scars remain. And that's okay."

"Minister from your scars, not your wounds. Like I do."

"Redemptive suffering serves a purpose. Destructive suffering just destroys. Know the difference."

"Your story—all of it—can be redeemed. Like Mine was."

Sit with whatever comes up. Don't rush this. Let the reality of the scarred Savior minister to your wounded places.

The Lamb who was slain stands at the center of heaven. Forever scarred. Forever worthy. Forever ministering from His wounds.

And you—wounded, scarred, in process—are being conformed to His image. Not to an image of invulnerability, but to an image of redeemed humanity. Wounded and healed. Scarred and whole. Broken and beautiful.

This is the pattern.

This is the calling.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

This is the crucified minister.

THE INVITATION TO CRUCIFORM MINISTRY

The cross isn't just an event in history. It's a pattern for ministry. A model for how woundedness becomes redemptive.

Jesus entered our woundedness fully. Jesus was wounded Himself. Jesus' wounds became His credentials. Jesus' scars remain in His glory. Jesus ministers through His wounds, not in spite of them.

This is the pattern for wounded healers.

You're invited to:

Stop hiding your scars. They're not disqualifications. They're part of your story. They're evidence of survival. They can serve others.

Stop trying to be invulnerable. You're human. Glorified humanity still bears scars. Strength is perfected through weakness, not by pretending you have no weakness.

Stop confusing self-destruction with self-emptying. Kenosis is chosen from strength for redemptive purposes. Self-destruction is compulsive, driven by wounds, and serves no one.

Start letting your healed wounds inform your ministry. Your scars give you credibility, compassion, authority born of experience. Use them.

Start embracing the descent. Down is the way up in the kingdom of God. Servanthood is the path to greatness. Weakness is the context for power.

Start trusting the resurrection pattern. Death precedes resurrection. The tomb comes before the empty tomb. Suffering can be redemptive when it follows the Jesus pattern.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The crucified minister isn't called to avoid suffering. The crucified minister is called to ensure that suffering is redemptive, not just destructive. Chosen, not just endured. Purposeful, not pointless. Leading to resurrection, not just ending in death.

Jesus is the model. The scarred Savior. The Lamb who was slain. The One who keeps His wounds as credentials for eternal ministry.

And you're being conformed to His image.

Not despite your wounds. Through them.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Read Philippians 2:5-11 slowly, meditatively. Where do you see yourself in this passage? Where do you resist this pattern? What would kenosis look like in your specific ministry context? Honestly assess: Are you engaged in dying to self (healthy kenosis) or destroying self (toxic martyrdom)? What's the difference in your situation? What needs to change? Moltmann says, "God is not more divine than He is in this humanity." How does this challenge your ideas about strength, power, and effective ministry? Contemplate the image of the scarred Savior. How does it change how you view your own scars? What scars are you still trying to hide that Jesus would say are part of your glory? Complete the meditation exercise. What did Jesus say to you through His scars? What did His wounds reveal about your wounds? Where are you trying to skip to resurrection without going through the cross? What death are you avoiding? What tomb are you rushing past? Henri Nouwen says, "The great challenge is living your wounds through instead of thinking them through." Where are you still just thinking about your wounds rather than actually living through the healing process? How can your healed wounds become credentials for ministry rather than sources of shame? What would it look like to minister like Jesus does—from your scars, not despite them?

"And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain." — Revelation 5:6 (NASB)

At the center of heaven.

At the throne of God.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Surrounded by worship.

Stands a Lamb.

Slain.

Scarred.

Worthy.

Not because He avoided suffering.

Not because He emerged unmarked.

Not because He pretended the wounds didn't exist.

But because He entered suffering fully.

Because He let Himself be wounded.

Because He kept His scars as evidence of love's cost.

This is the pattern.

The crucified minister.

Wounded. Healed. Scarred. Serving.

Not despite the wounds.

Through them.

Your scars are not your shame.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

They're your credentials.

Welcome to cruciform ministry.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

PART FOUR: MINISTRY FROM SCARS

"Your scars become your credentials"

CHAPTER 11: Authority Born of Suffering

The call came at 3 AM—officer-involved shooting with fatalities. The police department was requesting a chaplain at the scene. I threw on my clothes, grabbed my badge and credentials, and headed to the location.

When I arrived, the scene was chaos under control—that particular kind of organized crisis that first responders create in the midst of tragedy. Yellow tape marked the perimeter. Officers were conducting interviews. Detectives were processing evidence. And in the middle of it all, a young police officer sat in the back of a squad car, staring at nothing, covered in someone else's blood.

He'd shot and killed an armed suspect who'd threatened civilians. The shooting was justified. The suspect had given him no choice. But he'd still taken a human life, and the trauma of that was written all over his face.

I approached the sergeant in charge, showed my credentials, and asked if I could speak with the officer. The sergeant looked me over—taking in my Metro Community Chaplaincy badge, my age, my bearing.

"You former first responder?" he asked.

"Firefighter. Twenty years. Retired."

He nodded. "Good. He needs someone who gets it. Go ahead."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

That exchange happens almost every time I show up to a scene. They want to know: Have you been through fire? Do you know what this is like? Or are you just someone with a theology degree and good intentions?

Because in crisis, credentials that matter aren't the ones on paper. They're the ones written in experience.

I sat with that young officer for two hours. I didn't quote Scripture. I didn't pray (at first). I didn't offer platitudes about God's plan or try to explain away the trauma.

I just sat with him. And then I told him something true: "I know what it's like to see something you can't unsee. I know what it's like to make a split-second decision and then have to live with it forever. I know what the nightmares are like. I know how the adrenaline crash feels. I've been where you are."

His eyes met mine for the first time. "You have?"

"Yeah. Different circumstances, but same trauma. And I'm still here. You will be too. But you can't do this alone. You're going to need help. And that's not weakness—it's wisdom."

He nodded. Started to cry. And then we talked for real—about the shooting, the fear, the shaking hands, the replaying it over and over in his mind.

Later, as I was leaving, the sergeant pulled me aside. "How'd you know what to say to him?"

"I didn't," I said honestly. "I just know what it's like to carry trauma. And sometimes that's enough—just knowing someone else has been there and survived."

The sergeant shook my hand. "That's why we call you. Not because you've got all the answers. Because you've got scars that match ours."

That's experiential authority. Not authority that comes from position, credentials, or theological education. Authority that comes from shared suffering. From scars that match the wounds. From having been through fire—literally or figuratively—and being able to say, "I know. I've been there. You're not alone."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

This is the authority born of suffering. And it's the kind of authority that actually reaches people who are hurting.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN POSITIONAL AND EXPERIENTIAL AUTHORITY

Let me explain the difference between two types of authority, because understanding this changes everything about how you approach ministry.

POSITIONAL AUTHORITY

This is authority that comes from your role, title, credentials, or position in a hierarchy.

Examples:

- You're the senior pastor, so people defer to your leadership
- You have a doctorate, so people respect your theological knowledge
- You're the board chair, so you have decision-making power
- You're ordained, so you can perform certain functions
- You've been in ministry for decades, so you have institutional credibility

Characteristics:

- External validation
- Granted by institutions or organizations
- Can be taken away (lose the position, lose the authority)
- Commands compliance or respect based on role
- Doesn't require personal experience
- Can create distance between leader and led

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Limitations:

- People obey, but don't necessarily trust
- Works in structured contexts, not in crisis
- Can be abused without accountability
- Doesn't create genuine connection
- Often ineffective with people in trauma
- Can actually prevent authentic ministry

When it works:

- Organizational decisions
- Teaching doctrinal content
- Performing official functions
- Maintaining institutional structures
- Situations requiring clear chain of command

When it fails:

- Crisis situations
- Deep emotional/spiritual pain
- People who've been wounded by authority
- Contexts that demand authenticity
- Situations requiring trust, not compliance

EXPERIENTIAL AUTHORITY

This is authority that comes from having lived through something, survived it, and integrated it into wisdom.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Examples:

- You've been through depression, so you can sit with someone in darkness
- You've survived ministry betrayal, so you understand church hurt
- You've battled addiction, so you know recovery from the inside
- You've experienced loss, so you can be present to grief
- You've healed from trauma, so you recognize trauma in others

Characteristics:

- Internal validation
- Earned through experience and survival
- Can't be taken away (your story is yours)
- Commands trust based on shared experience
- Requires personal processing and healing
- Creates connection and credibility

Strengths:

- People trust because you've been there
- Works especially well in crisis
- Difficult to abuse (requires vulnerability)
- Creates genuine connection
- Highly effective with traumatized people
- Enables authentic ministry

When it works:

- Crisis intervention
- Pastoral counseling
- Recovery ministry
- Trauma-informed care
- Any context requiring deep trust
- Situations where people need hope, not answers

THE WOUNDED HEALER

When it fails:

- If you haven't actually healed (ministering from wounds)
- If you over-identify with the person's struggle
- If you project your experience onto theirs
- If you share inappropriately or too much
- If you need their validation

Here's the key insight: Most seminary education focuses on positional authority—earning degrees, understanding theology, learning pastoral functions, developing leadership skills. Very little focuses on experiential authority—how to process your own suffering so it becomes wisdom you can offer others.

But in actual ministry, especially with broken people, **experiential authority is often more powerful than positional authority.**

Let me show you why:

When a person is in crisis—depressed, suicidal, traumatized, grieving, betrayed—they don't care about your degrees. They care about whether you understand what they're going through. They're not looking for someone with answers. They're looking for someone who's been in the darkness and found a way out.

Your theology might be impeccable. But if you've never been depressed, you can't sit with depression the way someone who's survived it can.

Your counseling training might be extensive. But if you've never been betrayed, you can't understand betrayal trauma the way someone who's healed from it can.

Your leadership credentials might be impressive. But if you've never failed publicly, you can't minister to failure the way someone who's survived it can.

I have both kinds of authority. I'm ordained (positional). I'm a certified chaplain (positional). I have theological training (positional). And those credentials matter—they give me access, they establish legitimacy, they create organizational authority.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

But when I'm sitting with a firefighter who's having PTSD flashbacks, my credentials don't matter. My scars do. When I'm counseling a pastor who's burned out, my ordination doesn't create trust. My story of burnout and recovery does.

Positional authority gets you in the room. Experiential authority gets you into the person's heart.

And here's what's powerful: **When you have both, you're incredibly effective.** Positional authority provides structure, legitimacy, and organizational support. Experiential authority provides connection, credibility, and authentic ministry.

But if I had to choose? If I could only have one?

I'd choose experiential authority every time.

Because I've seen too many people with all the right credentials who couldn't actually minister to hurting people. And I've seen too many people with no credentials at all who were profoundly effective because they'd been through fire and knew how to sit with others in the flames.

WHY YOUR SCARS GIVE YOU CREDIBILITY

There's something that happens when you share your scars with someone who's currently wounded. Something powerful. Something that creates instant connection and credibility.

Let me tell you what doesn't create credibility:

"I understand what you're going through." (When you haven't been through it.)

"I know it's hard." (Platitudes without experience.)

"God has a plan." (Theology without empathy.)

"You'll get through this." (Optimism without authority.)

THE WOUNDED HEALER

These aren't necessarily wrong. But they're hollow when they come from someone who hasn't actually been there. They sound like what a textbook would say. They feel distant, clinical, disconnected.

But here's what creates instant credibility:

"I've been where you are." (Actual shared experience.)

"I know what that darkness feels like." (Specific understanding, not generic sympathy.)

"Here's what helped me." (Practical wisdom born of experience.)

"You're not alone. I'm still here. You will be too." (Hope rooted in survival.)

The difference is everything.

Why scars create credibility:

1. Scars prove you survived.

When someone is in the middle of crisis, they don't know if they'll survive. They feel like they're drowning. They can't see a way out. They're terrified that this will destroy them.

Your scars are proof that survival is possible. You were wounded. You lived. That's not theory—it's evidence.

I can tell a suicidal person, "I've been there. I had the plan. I wrote the note. I was ready to end it. And something—Someone—stopped me. I got help. I did the work. And I'm still here. You can be too."

That's not optimism. That's testimony. And it creates hope in a way that theological arguments about the value of life never could.

2. Scars prove you understand.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

There's a massive difference between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy says, "I'm sorry you're hurting." Empathy says, "I know what that hurt feels like."

When I sit with a pastor who's been betrayed by his board, I don't have to imagine what that feels like. I know. I've felt it. I can say, "The powerlessness? The sense of being disposable? The way they use spiritual language to justify ungodly behavior? Yeah. I know."

And suddenly, he's not alone. Someone gets it. Someone's been there. Someone understands in a way that feels like being truly seen for the first time.

3. Scars prove you're not afraid of their darkness.

When you've been through trauma and healed from it, you're not threatened by other people's trauma. You can sit in their darkness without needing to fix it or flee from it. Because you've been in darkness yourself and survived.

People in crisis can sense when someone is uncomfortable with their pain. They can tell when the counselor is rushing them to feel better because the counselor can't tolerate the discomfort. They know when the pastor is offering quick answers because the pastor is afraid of the questions.

But when you've got scars from similar wounds, you can sit calmly in someone else's darkness. Because you know: Darkness isn't fatal. You can survive it. And sometimes the most healing thing is just having someone sit in the dark with you without trying to turn on all the lights.

4. Scars prove you know the path.

You're not guessing about the healing journey. You're not theorizing about what might help. You've actually walked the path from wound to scar. You know what worked, what didn't, what the pitfalls are, what to watch for.

That's invaluable. Because someone in acute crisis can't see the path. They can't imagine healing. They don't know where to start.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

But you do. You've been there. You can say, "Here's what the next step looks like. Here's what helped me. Here's where you'll need professional help. Here's how long this might take. Here's what to expect."

That's not advice from a book. That's a roadmap drawn from experience.

5. Scars prove you're willing to be vulnerable.

When you share your scars, you're making yourself vulnerable. You're letting someone see where you've been broken. You're trusting them with your story.

That vulnerability is powerful. It gives the other person permission to be vulnerable too. It says, "You can be honest here. You can tell me the real stuff. I won't judge you, because look—I'm broken too."

Many people have never had anyone model healthy vulnerability for them. They've never seen a leader admit struggle. They've never heard a minister say, "I've been there. I've failed. I've needed help."

Your willingness to share your scars creates safe space for them to acknowledge their wounds.

THE PAUL'S THORN PRINCIPLE (2 CORINTHIANS 12)

Paul had a "thorn in the flesh." We don't know exactly what it was—physical illness, chronic pain, spiritual oppression, some other affliction. The specifics don't matter as much as what Paul does with it.

He prayed three times for God to remove it. Three times. He clearly saw it as a problem, an obstacle, something that hindered his ministry.

And God said no.

"And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10, NASB).

THE WOUNDED HEALER

This is revolutionary theology. Paul doesn't just accept his thorn—he *boasts* about his weaknesses. He becomes *content* with difficulties. Because he's discovered something profound:

Power is perfected in weakness. Not despite weakness. Not after weakness is overcome. IN weakness.

When Paul is weak, God's power shows most clearly. When Paul is limited, God's limitlessness becomes obvious. When Paul struggles, God's sufficiency becomes evident.

The thorn that Paul saw as a problem became his greatest credential.

Think about it: If Paul had been invulnerable, incredibly healthy, never struggling, always victorious—when his ministry succeeded, people would credit Paul. "Of course he's effective—look how strong/smart/gifted he is."

But when Paul is clearly weak—dealing with his thorn, admitting his struggles, being honest about his limitations—and his ministry is still powerfully effective, there's only one explanation: God.

Your thorn—whatever it is—can function the same way.

The depression you battle? It makes you compassionate to others in darkness and gives you credibility when you tell them healing is possible.

The anxiety you manage? It makes you patient with others' fears and gives you authority when you share coping strategies.

The addiction you're recovering from? It makes you effective in recovery ministry and gives you street cred that no seminary degree could provide.

The childhood trauma you've healed from? It makes you able to recognize it in others and gives you wisdom about the healing process.

The ministry failures in your past? They make you humble, empathetic, and real—and give you authority with other ministers who are failing.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The thing you prayed for God to remove might be the very thing that qualifies you for your most powerful ministry.

This doesn't mean God caused your suffering. It doesn't mean your struggle is good. It doesn't mean you shouldn't seek healing.

It means: God can take even the thorns—the ongoing struggles, the tender scars, the things that limit you—and use them as the very means through which His power is displayed.

Your weakness becomes the context for His strength. Your limitation becomes the space for His sufficiency. Your thorn becomes your credential.

I spent years praying for God to remove my depression. To heal me completely so I'd never struggle again. To make me whole in a way that meant no more medication, no more therapy, no more dark seasons.

He didn't.

I still deal with depression. I still take medication. I still see a therapist. I still have seasons when getting out of bed takes everything I have.

But that thorn has become my credential for crisis intervention work. When I sit with someone who's suicidal, my authority doesn't come from having conquered depression—it comes from knowing how to live with it, manage it, get help for it, and survive it.

My weakness is where God's power shows most clearly.

That's the Paul's thorn principle: Your struggle can become your strength—not when you overcome it completely, but when you learn to minister through it with God's power.

SUFFERING AS QUALIFICATION, NOT DISQUALIFICATION

We need to completely flip the script on how we think about suffering and ministry qualification.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The default assumption in ministry culture is: Suffering disqualifies you. If you've struggled significantly, if you've been wounded deeply, if you've failed publicly—you're damaged goods. You might be restored to fellowship, but you're probably not leadership material anymore.

The biblical pattern is the opposite: Suffering qualifies you. It doesn't automatically qualify you—you still need healing, integration, wisdom. But your survival of suffering gives you credibility and authority that untested people don't have.

Look at who God chooses for leadership:

Moses: Murderer. Fugitive. Speech impediment. Self-doubt. God chooses him to lead the exodus.

David: Adulterer. Murderer. Terrible father whose family is a disaster. God calls him "a man after My own heart."

Peter: Denier of Christ. Impulsive. Foot-in-mouth disease. Jesus makes him the rock on which the church is built.

Paul: Persecutor of the church. Guilty of Christians' deaths. Jesus makes him the primary apostle to the Gentiles.

The woman at the well: Five failed marriages. Currently in an improper relationship. Jesus reveals His identity to her first, and she becomes an evangelist to her whole town.

The pattern is clear: God doesn't just tolerate broken people in leadership—He prefers them.

Why?

Because broken people who've been healed know grace in a way that unbroken people don't. They don't just believe in grace theoretically—they've experienced it existentially.

Because suffering produces character, perseverance, and hope (Romans 5:3-4). The person who's never suffered might have potential. The person who's suffered and survived has proven capacity.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Because wounded healers can reach wounded people. You don't send someone who's never been sick to treat sick people. You send someone who's been sick and recovered—they know what it's like and they know the path to healing.

Because God's power is most visible through weak vessels. If only strong, capable, impressive people led in ministry, people would credit the leaders. But when clearly broken people lead powerfully, everyone knows it's God.

Scripture is explicit about this. Look at 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 (NASB):

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort."

Read that again carefully. Paul is saying:

- God comforts us in our affliction
- NOT just for our benefit
- But SO THAT we can comfort others
- With the SAME comfort we received
- Our affliction serves others' comfort
- We share both suffering and comfort

The comfort you received in your affliction was never just for you. It was for you AND through you to others.

Your depression? God comforted you through it so you can comfort others through theirs.

Your trauma? God's healing in your life becomes the path to healing for others.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Your failure? God's restoration of you becomes hope for others who've failed.

Your loss? God's presence in your grief becomes His presence through you to others who grieve.

Your suffering, when healed, qualifies you to minister to others in similar suffering.

Not despite your suffering. Through it. Because of it.

This is radically different from the "damaged goods" narrative that many wounded ministers carry.

You're not damaged goods. You're credentialed ministers whose credentials are written in scars.

LEADING FROM LIMP: JACOB AT PENIEL

There's a powerful image in Genesis 32 that captures what ministry from scars looks like.

Jacob is about to meet his brother Esau—the brother he defrauded, who swore to kill him, who Jacob has been running from for twenty years. The night before the meeting, Jacob is alone, and "a man wrestled with him until daybreak" (Genesis 32:24, NASB).

This is no ordinary wrestling match. This is Jacob wrestling with God Himself. And Jacob refuses to let go until God blesses him.

Here's what happens: "When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him" (Genesis 32:25, NASB).

God dislocates Jacob's hip. Permanently. Jacob walks with a limp for the rest of his life.

But he also gets the blessing. And a new name: Israel, "for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed" (Genesis 32:28, NASB).

Jacob limps away from Peniel with a new name, a blessing, and a permanent scar.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

And here's what's powerful: **Jacob leads from that limp.** He becomes the patriarch whose name is given to the entire nation—Israel. His descendants are "the children of Israel." His story shapes the entire narrative of God's people.

And he does all of it while limping.

The limp isn't a disqualification from leadership. The limp is part of his leadership identity.

This is the image of ministry from scars:

You bear the marks of where you've wrestled with God. The struggle was real. The wounding happened. You didn't emerge unscathed.

But you also bear the blessing. You prevailed. You survived. You got the blessing even though it cost you.

And now you lead from the limp. Your limitation is visible. Your scar is obvious. You're not pretending to be unwounded.

But your limp gives you authority. Because everyone knows: You've been in a fight with God Himself and lived to tell about it. You've been wounded and blessed. You know what it costs to wrestle and what it means to receive blessing.

I lead from a limp. My depression is my limp—visible, ongoing, limiting. My ministry wounds are my limp—tender scars that ache in certain weather. My father wounds are my limp—healed but present, informing how I relate.

And I used to see these as disqualifications. As things I needed to hide or overcome before I could really lead.

But they're not. They're part of my leadership identity. They're what make me effective with broken people. They're what give me credibility with strugglers. They're my Peniel limp—evidence that I've wrestled with God and received both wounding and blessing.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

You don't have to be unwounded to lead. You have to have wrestled, survived, and been willing to bear the limp.

Your limp might be:

- The mental health condition you manage
- The addiction you're in recovery from
- The trauma you're still processing
- The relationship damage you're repairing
- The ministry failure you survived
- The theological questions you still carry

That limp is not your disqualification. It's your credential.

Because people who are limping themselves don't need a leader who's never been injured. They need a leader who knows what it's like to limp and still lead.

CASE STUDIES: MINISTERS WHOSE SCARS GAVE THEM ACCESS AND CREDIBILITY

Let me tell you about some real people (names changed, details modified) whose scars became their credentials:

CASE STUDY 1: SARAH - THE RECOVERED ADDICT

Sarah was a cocaine addict for seven years. She lost her marriage, her children (temporarily), her job, her health. She hit absolute rock bottom—homeless, prostituting herself for drug money, nearly dead from an overdose.

A recovery program saved her life. Through years of 12-step work, therapy, and rebuilt relationships, she got clean. She got her kids back. She rebuilt her life.

Now she's the director of a recovery ministry that serves women coming out of addiction and prostitution. She has zero formal credentials—no degree, no certification, no ordination.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

But when a woman walks into that ministry—broken, strung out, ashamed, hopeless—and Sarah says, "I've been where you are. I've been on the streets. I've sold myself. I've wanted to die. And I'm still here. Clean. Whole. You can be too"—that woman believes her.

Because Sarah's scars match her wounds.

Sarah told me once: "My addiction was the worst thing that ever happened to me. And it's also my greatest ministry credential. Because when I tell these women I understand, they know I'm not talking theory. They see my track marks. They see my scars. And they see someone who survived. That gives them hope when nothing else can."

Her scars gave her access to a population that credentialed ministers often can't reach. And gave her credibility that no seminary degree could provide.

CASE STUDY 2: MARCUS - THE FAILED PASTOR

Marcus planted a church that grew to 800 people in five years. He was the success story. The conference speaker. The model church planter.

Then it all came out: He'd been having an affair with a church member for two years. His wife filed for divorce. The church dissolved. His reputation was destroyed. He lost everything.

He spent five years out of ministry. Doing the work—intensive therapy, marriage counseling (they eventually reconciled), accountability, processing his sex addiction and intimacy wounds. No shortcuts. No quick restoration. Real, deep, painful work.

Now he mentors pastors who've failed morally. He runs support groups for ministers dealing with sexual addiction. He writes honestly about his failure and recovery.

And pastors who are struggling—who are in affairs or addicted to porn or hiding sexual sin—they call Marcus. Not the successful pastors with clean records. Marcus. Because they know: He's been there. He knows what it's like to lose everything. And he knows the path to genuine restoration.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Marcus told me: "My failure destroyed me. But my recovery rebuilt me into someone who can actually help other failing pastors. Before, I would have judged them. Now, I can sit with them in their shame and say, 'I know. I've been there. And there's a way through this.' That only works because I failed and then did the real work to heal."

His scar—public moral failure—became his credential for a ministry he never could have had otherwise.

CASE STUDY 3: JENNIFER - THE BETRAYED MINISTER

Jennifer was on staff at a megachurch for twelve years. Youth pastor, then associate pastor, then executive pastor. She was faithful, gifted, effective.

Then the senior pastor started an affair with a staff member. Jennifer, as executive pastor, became aware of it and confronted him. He denied it. She brought evidence to the board. They sided with the pastor, fired Jennifer, made her sign an NDA, and spread rumors about why she'd "really" been let go.

It destroyed her. Not just losing the job—losing her reputation, her ministry community, her sense of calling. The betrayal was crushing. She spent three years in therapy processing church trauma, spiritual abuse, and the damage of being scapegoated.

Now she runs a ministry for people healing from church hurt. She helps ministers who've been fired or abused by church systems. She consults with churches on creating healthy accountability structures.

And when someone who's been betrayed by church leadership contacts her, she doesn't offer platitudes. She says, "I know what that feels like. The gaslighting. The power plays. The spiritual language used to justify ungodly behavior. I've been there. And I'm still here, still serving God, still believing the church can be better than what hurt us."

Jennifer told me: "I wouldn't wish what happened to me on anyone. But my scars from that betrayal give me credibility with people who've been similarly wounded. They know I get it. And they trust me to walk with them through healing because I've walked the path myself."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Her scar—ministry betrayal—gave her authority with a population desperate for someone who understands.

CASE STUDY 4: DAVID - THE DEPRESSED CHAPLAIN

David is a hospital chaplain. He's also someone who's battled severe depression for twenty years. Multiple hospitalizations. Suicide attempts. Years of medication trials. Ongoing therapy.

He's open about it. Not inappropriately—he doesn't dump on patients. But when a patient is admitted for suicide attempt, when a family member is dealing with mental illness, when someone is ashamed of needing psychiatric care—David can say, "I've been there. I take medication. I've been hospitalized. I see a therapist. And I'm still here, still serving, still whole."

That changes everything for people who think mental illness means they're spiritually deficient or broken beyond repair.

David told me: "My depression used to feel like my greatest weakness. Now I see it as one of my greatest ministry tools. Not the depression itself—that's still hard. But my survival of it. My management of it. My integration of it. That gives me credibility with people in mental health crisis that I'd never have if I'd never struggled."

His scar—ongoing mental health struggle—gives him authority in mental health ministry that positional credentials alone never could.

THE PATTERN

Do you see it? Each of these people has scars. Real scars. From real wounds. Some self-inflicted (addiction, moral failure). Some inflicted by others (betrayal). Some from no one's fault (mental illness).

But in every case, the scars that could have disqualified them from ministry became their primary credentials.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Not because the wounding was good. Not because God caused their suffering. But because they let their wounds heal properly, they integrated their trauma, and they learned to minister from their scars rather than their wounds.

Their suffering qualified them for ministry that untested people simply cannot do as effectively.

HEBREWS 2:17-18 - THE PATTERN OF JESUS

Let me bring this back to Jesus, because He's the ultimate model.

"Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2:17-18, NASB).

Notice the language: **"He had to be made like His brethren."**

Not "it would be nice if." Not "it was an optional feature." **He had to be.**

Why? **"So that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest."**

Jesus couldn't be the high priest we needed without becoming like us. Without experiencing human limitation. Without suffering temptation. Without knowing what it's like to be human in a broken world.

"For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted."

Because He suffered, He's able to help. Not despite suffering. Because of it. Through it.

His suffering qualified Him to be our high priest. Not His divinity alone. His suffering humanity.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

This is the pattern for all ministry from scars:

You had to go through what you went through (not because God caused it, but because He's redeeming it) so that you could become merciful and faithful in ministry to others going through similar things.

Since you yourself have suffered depression, you're able to help those suffering depression.

Since you yourself have been betrayed, you're able to help those who've been betrayed.

Since you yourself have failed morally, you're able to help those who've failed morally.

Since you yourself have experienced loss, you're able to help those who grieve.

Your suffering wasn't purposeless. And it wasn't wasted. It's being redeemed into authority for ministry.

Not authority that lords over people. Authority that serves people. Authority that says, "I've been where you are, and I can show you the way through because I've walked it myself."

PUTTING WOUNDEDNESS IN SERVICE OF OTHERS

Henri Nouwen's words echo through all of this: "Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not 'How can we hide our wounds?' so they don't show. It is, rather, 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?'"

How can we put our woundedness in service of others?

This is the culmination of everything we've been discussing. The journey from wound to scar. The healing process. The integration. The redemptive narrative.

It all leads here: **Your healed wounds becoming service to others.**

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Practically, this means:

- 1. Know your scars.** Be clear about what you've survived, what you've healed from, what you've integrated. This is your inventory of experiential authority.
- 2. Know your limits.** You can only minister from healed scars, not active wounds. Be honest about what's truly scar tissue and what's still tender.
- 3. Develop discernment about when to share.** Not every situation needs your story. Ask: Will sharing this serve them? Or am I sharing to process my own stuff?
- 4. Share appropriately.** Enough to connect and give hope. Not so much that it becomes about you or overwhelms them.
- 5. Point to the Healer, not the healing.** Your story is powerful, but it's not the point. Jesus is the point. Your story is evidence of what He does.
- 6. Stay in your lane.** Minister to wounds you've experienced and healed from. Refer out for wounds you haven't carried.
- 7. Keep doing your own healing work.** Your scars need ongoing maintenance. Stay in therapy, spiritual direction, support groups. Keep healing so you can keep serving from healed places.

Eugene Peterson writes: "Suffering draws us back into ourselves and away from others. It often leads to a narrowing of relationships and interests. But it can also lead to an opening."

Suffering can close you or open you. It can make you bitter or better. It can lead to isolation or to service.

The difference is whether you let the suffering heal into scars that serve, or whether you stay in the wound.

Your scars can open you to depths of ministry that untested people simply cannot access.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

But only if you've done the work. Only if you've healed. Only if you've integrated your story. Only if you've let your wounds become scars.

And then—then—your scars become your credentials.

The authority born of suffering.

The credibility that comes from shared experience.

The ministry that only the wounded-and-healed can provide.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Looking at your life, what scars do you carry that could give you experiential authority in specific ministry contexts? What populations might your scars give you unique access to? Where have you been relying primarily on positional authority when experiential authority might be more effective? How might sharing your scars change your ministry impact? What's your "thorn in the flesh"—the ongoing struggle that you've prayed for God to remove but that remains? How might this thorn actually be qualifying you for specific ministry rather than disqualifying you? Think about the case studies (Sarah, Marcus, Jennifer, David). Which one resonates most with your story? What can you learn from how they put their woundedness in service of others? Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 again slowly. What comfort have you received in your affliction? How are you (or could you be) using that comfort to serve others in similar affliction? Where are you "leading from a limp"? What limitations or ongoing struggles are part of your ministry identity? How can you embrace these as credentials rather than hiding them as disqualifications? Henri Nouwen asks, "How can we put our woundedness in service of others?" Answer this specifically for your own scars. What's your next step in moving from healed wounds to active service? What keeps you from sharing your scars appropriately in ministry? Fear? Shame? Lack of healing? Uncertainty about appropriateness? What needs to change for your scars to become credentials?

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." — 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NASB)

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The comfort you received was never just for you.

It was for you and through you to others.

Your suffering, when healed, qualifies you.

Your scars give you credibility.

Your wounds, transformed into scars, become your credentials.

Not despite what you've been through.

Because of it.

Through it.

This is authority born of suffering.

This is ministry from scars.

This is the wounded healer, finally understanding that the wounds weren't wasted.

They were credentials in the making.

Welcome to ministry from healed places.

Your scars are ready to serve.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 12: Compassion Without Codependency

Every firefighter knows the rescue paradox: You can't save someone if you're drowning too.

It's drilled into us from day one of training. You approach a water rescue, and the first thing they teach you is: Don't jump in without flotation. Don't let the drowning person grab onto you. Don't get so close that their panic pulls you under.

Because here's what happens: A drowning person is desperate. Terrified. Operating on pure survival instinct. And if you get close enough, they will grab you. They will climb on top of you. They will push you under in their attempt to stay above water. They don't mean to drown you—they're just drowning themselves, and their panic makes them dangerous.

If you're not trained, if you're not protected, if you don't maintain appropriate distance—you'll both go under. Two bodies to recover instead of one to rescue.

The same principle applies to every kind of rescue: You can't save someone if you're drowning too.

In a burning building, you don't run in without protective gear. You don't stay so long that you run out of air. You don't sacrifice yourself pointlessly—because then you're a victim who needs rescue, not a rescuer.

In medical emergency response, you don't treat patients without protecting yourself from bloodborne pathogens. You don't neglect your own safety to help someone else. Because if you become a casualty, you can't help anyone.

The rescue paradox is this: To save others, you must maintain your own capacity to function. Sacrificing yourself doesn't increase the number of people saved—it just increases the number of casualties.

But somehow, in ministry, we've forgotten this principle.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

We've created a culture where sacrificing yourself is seen as faithfulness. Where having no boundaries is called servanthood. Where burning out is a badge of honor. Where drowning while trying to rescue others is martyrdom.

We call it compassion. We call it dying to self. We call it taking up your cross.

But often, it's not any of those things. It's codependency. And codependency doesn't save anyone—it just creates more casualties.

I learned this the hardest way possible: through my own codependent ministry that nearly destroyed me and the people I was trying to serve.

For years, I operated from unhealed wounds, trying to rescue everyone, unable to say no, working myself to exhaustion, believing that my worth came from how needed I was. I had no boundaries. I couldn't distinguish between their needs and my needs. I used other people's crises to avoid dealing with my own pain.

I called it ministry. It was codependency.

And it nearly killed me. Literally. The burnout that led to my breakdown, the depression that brought suicidal ideation, the collapse of my ministry—all of it was rooted in codependent patterns I'd been operating from my entire life.

Recovery required learning an entirely different way of serving. Learning the difference between empathy and enmeshment. Between compassion and codependency. Between healthy ministry and toxic caretaking.

That's what led me to start Beloved Rising—a ministry specifically for people recovering from codependency. Because I discovered that the church is full of wounded healers who are drowning while trying to rescue others. And nobody's teaching us how to stay afloat while we serve.

So let's talk about the rescue paradox in ministry. Let's learn how to have compassion without codependency. Let's discover how to save others without drowning ourselves.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

UNDERSTANDING CODEPENDENCY IN MINISTRY

First, we need to understand what codependency actually is. Because many ministers don't realize they're codependent—they think they're just being faithful, sacrificial, compassionate.

Codependency is a relational pattern where your sense of worth, identity, and emotional wellbeing becomes dependent on taking care of others, being needed, and controlling outcomes.

Let me break that down:

Your sense of worth comes from being needed. You feel valuable when people depend on you. You feel worthless when you're not helping someone. Your identity is "the helper," "the rescuer," "the strong one."

You can't distinguish between their feelings and your feelings. When they're upset, you're upset. When they're in crisis, you're in crisis. You absorb their emotions as if they're your own. Their problems become your problems.

You try to control outcomes. You can't let people face natural consequences. You can't let them fail. You can't let them struggle. You jump in to fix, rescue, manage, control—because their outcome feels like your responsibility.

You have poor or no boundaries. You can't say no. You can't set limits. You work yourself to exhaustion. You sacrifice your own needs, your family, your health—because other people's needs always seem more important.

You use caretaking to avoid your own pain. Staying busy helping others means you don't have to deal with your own struggles. Other people's crises distract you from your own. Their needs justify avoiding your needs.

Sound familiar?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Here's what codependency looks like in ministry:

The pastor who can't say no to any request, works 80-hour weeks, has no time for family, and is heading toward burnout—but feels guilty about even considering boundaries because "people need me."

The counselor who takes on too many clients, thinks about them constantly, dreams about their problems, and is emotionally exhausted—but can't refer them out because "I'm the only one who really understands them."

The worship leader who needs the team to need her, creates dependency rather than empowerment, can't delegate, and subtly sabotages others' growth—because her identity is wrapped up in being indispensable.

The youth pastor who's enmeshed with students, shares too much of his personal life, has no boundaries around time or communication, and is meeting his own needs for belonging and significance through his students.

The church board member who can't let the church struggle, constantly bails out bad decisions, enables dysfunction, and blocks necessary change—because he can't tolerate the discomfort of people facing consequences.

The minister's wife who sacrifices her entire life for her husband's ministry, has no identity outside of "pastor's wife," enables his workaholism, and teaches her children that their needs don't matter.

All of these people would describe themselves as compassionate, servant-hearted, faithful. And they genuinely are trying to help. They genuinely care about people.

But they're codependent. And codependency, no matter how well-intentioned, ultimately hurts everyone involved.

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Why codependency is toxic in ministry:

It's unsustainable. You can't pour from an empty cup forever. You will burn out. You will collapse. And then you can't help anyone.

It creates dependency, not growth. When you rescue people from consequences, fix their problems, do for them what they should do for themselves—you don't empower them. You infantilize them.

It prevents real transformation. People don't change when someone else is managing their life for them. They change when they face reality, take responsibility, and do their own work.

It's often about you, not them. If you're honest, you need to be needed. You need to feel valuable. You need the validation that comes from being the rescuer. Their crisis is meeting your need.

It models unhealthy relationships. Your congregation learns from you. If you model codependency, you teach them that love means having no boundaries, that service means self-destruction, that relationships mean enmeshment.

It ends in resentment. You give and give and give, expecting gratitude or appreciation or at least recognition. When it doesn't come (and it never comes in the amounts you need), you become bitter.

It prevents genuine compassion. Real compassion sees people as capable, autonomous beings who can grow through struggle. Codependency sees people as helpless victims who need you to save them.

I had to learn all of this through painful experience. My codependent ministry patterns nearly destroyed my marriage, damaged my relationships with my daughters, contributed to my burnout, and actually harmed many of the people I was trying to help.

Recovery meant doing the brutal work of understanding where my codependency came from (childhood wounds, father issues, need for approval) and learning entirely new patterns of relating.

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And that's what Beloved Rising is built on—helping people, especially ministers, learn to serve from health rather than from woundedness. To have compassion without codependency. To help without drowning.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EMPATHY AND ENMESHMENT

One of the most important distinctions I've learned in recovery is the difference between empathy and enmeshment. Because they can look similar on the surface, but they're radically different in practice and outcome.

EMPATHY

What it is: The capacity to understand and share another person's feelings while maintaining your own separate identity and emotional regulation.

What it looks like:

- "I understand what you're feeling. That sounds really difficult."
- You feel compassion for their pain without absorbing it as your own
- You can sit with their distress without needing to fix it immediately
- You maintain awareness that their feelings are theirs, not yours
- You can be present to their pain without it destabilizing you

Characteristics:

- Emotional connection **WITH** appropriate distance
- "I see you" not "I am you"
- You understand their feelings but stay grounded in your own
- You can be affected without being consumed
- You maintain separate identity and emotional regulation

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Results:

- You can help because you're stable
- They feel seen and understood
- You don't burn out
- Healthy, boundaried relationship
- Genuine connection

ENMESHMENT

What it is: Losing the boundary between yourself and another person, absorbing their emotions as if they're your own, becoming so entangled that you can't tell where you end and they begin.

What it looks like:

- "When you're upset, I can't function."
- Their crisis becomes your crisis
- Their feelings become your feelings
- You can't be okay unless they're okay
- You're constantly thinking about them, worrying about them, trying to manage their life

Characteristics:

- Emotional fusion, no healthy distance
- "Your pain is my pain" to the point where you can't distinguish
- You lose yourself in their experience
- You're consumed, destabilized, unable to function
- No separate identity—you're merged

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Results:

- You can't help because you're drowning too
- They become dependent rather than empowered
- You burn out
- Unhealthy, boundary-less relationship
- Toxic connection that damages both people

Let me give you a concrete example:

EMPATHY: A church member calls you at 11 PM in crisis. You listen, offer support, pray with them, help them develop a plan for getting help tomorrow, and then you go to bed. You're concerned for them, but you can sleep because you trust that God is with them and they have resources. You follow up the next day.

ENMESHMENT: A church member calls you at 11 PM in crisis. You talk for three hours. You can't sleep because you're worried about them. You wake up thinking about them. You cancel your appointments to be available for them. You're texting them constantly. You can't focus on anything else. Their crisis has become your crisis. Your family is annoyed because you're not present. But you can't stop because if something happens to them, you'd feel responsible.

See the difference?

Empathy says: "I care about you. I'm here to support you. And I trust you (and God) to handle this with appropriate help."

Enmeshment says: "Your wellbeing is my responsibility. I can't function unless you're okay. I have to fix this for you."

How to maintain empathy without falling into enmeshment:

1. Notice your physical and emotional responses. Empathy might make you feel compassion, sadness, concern. Enmeshment makes you feel panic, anxiety, inability to function. Your body knows the difference.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

2. Ask: "Whose feelings are these?" If you're feeling their exact emotions, you've crossed into enmeshment. Step back. Breathe. Re-establish the boundary: "This is their feeling. I can be present to it without carrying it."

3. Maintain separate identity. Remind yourself: "I am not them. Their crisis is not my crisis. Their outcome is not my responsibility. I can care without carrying."

4. Set time boundaries. You can be present for a conversation or a session. You can't be available 24/7. Time boundaries help maintain emotional boundaries.

5. Have support for yourself. If you're regularly enmeshed with the people you serve, you need your own therapist, spiritual director, support group. You need people who support you so you're not depending on the people you serve to meet your needs.

6. Remember: Their work is theirs to do. You can walk alongside. You can't walk for them. Their healing is their responsibility. Your role is support, not rescue.

I've learned this in my chaplaincy work. When I respond to a traumatic scene, I can be deeply present to the first responder's pain—I can sit in it, witness it, hold space for it. But I can't absorb it as my own. I can't take it home. I can't let it destabilize my functioning.

That's empathy. Enmeshment would be if I became so merged with their trauma that I couldn't function, couldn't sleep, couldn't be present to my own life.

The difference is crucial. **Empathy serves. Enmeshment drowns.**

RECOGNIZING SAVIOR COMPLEX AND MESSIAH IDENTITY

Here's an uncomfortable truth: Many of us in ministry have a savior complex. We need to be needed. We need to rescue. We've built our identity around being the one who saves people.

And that's not just unhealthy—it's actually blasphemous. Because there's only one Savior. And it's not you.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Savior Complex is the belief (conscious or unconscious) that:

- People need you specifically to be okay
- You're responsible for fixing everyone's problems
- You're the only one who can really help
- If you don't intervene, disaster will happen
- Your value comes from how many people you save

Messiah Identity is building your entire sense of self around being the rescuer, the savior, the indispensable one.

Here's what it looks like in ministry:

"If I don't do it, it won't get done." You believe the church/ministry/people can't function without you. So you do everything, control everything, refuse to delegate.

"They need me." You believe you're uniquely positioned to help. No one else has your gifts, your understanding, your compassion. So you can't refer out, can't say no, can't let anyone else serve them.

"I'm the only one who really understands them." You believe you have special insight or connection. So you keep people dependent on you rather than empowering them to find multiple sources of support.

"If something goes wrong, it's my fault." You take responsibility for outcomes you don't control. If they relapse, if they fail, if they hurt—you feel like you failed. Their choices become your failure.

"I can't rest while people are hurting." You believe taking care of yourself is selfish when others need you. So you sacrifice sleep, health, family, boundaries—because "people are depending on me."

Where this comes from:

Often, savior complex develops in childhood. You learned early that your value came from being useful, being needed, rescuing people (maybe a parent, maybe siblings). You learned that love was earned through caretaking. You learned that being the savior was the only way to matter.

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Then you professionalized it. You went into ministry. And suddenly your childhood survival strategy has a theological framework and a paycheck.

But it's still rooted in woundedness, not calling. In need, not love. In control, not trust.

The problem with savior complex:

It's idolatry. You're putting yourself in God's place. You're acting like you're the savior. You're trusting your own ability to rescue rather than God's.

It's arrogant. However humble it seems, it's actually incredibly arrogant to believe people can't be okay without you. That God can't work through anyone else. That you're indispensable.

It creates unhealthy dependency. People don't learn to depend on God—they learn to depend on you. You become their functional savior. And that's terrible for both of you.

It prevents God from working. Sometimes God wants to work through consequences, struggle, other people, different paths. But you keep jumping in to rescue, preventing the very thing God might be using to transform them.

It will destroy you. You cannot be everyone's savior. The weight will crush you. The responsibility will drown you. You will burn out, blow up, or break down.

Breaking free from savior complex:

1. Get brutally honest about your motivations. Why do you *need* to be needed? What wound are you trying to heal by rescuing others? What are you avoiding in your own life by staying busy saving everyone else?

2. Remember: There's already a Savior, and you're not Him. Jesus is the Savior. Your job is not to save people. Your job is to point them to the Savior and walk alongside them in their journey.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

3. Learn to tolerate other people's struggles. You don't have to fix everything. People can struggle. People can fail. People can face consequences. And God is still at work, even when you're not.

4. Practice saying: "That sounds really hard. How can I support you as you work through this?" Not: "Let me fix this for you."

5. Develop a community of care around people. Don't be their only source of support. Connect them to therapy, support groups, other ministers, friends. Diffuse the dependency.

6. Get help for your own wounds. Your need to rescue others is usually connected to unhealed parts of yourself. Do your own therapy. Process your own trauma. Heal your own wounds.

I had to face my savior complex in recovery. I had to admit: I needed people to need me because it made me feel valuable. I couldn't tolerate people struggling because it made me feel like I was failing. I kept people dependent on me because it met my need to feel important.

That's not ministry. That's using people to medicate my own wounds.

Real ministry trusts God to be the Savior and positions you as a fellow pilgrim who can walk alongside, not a messiah who does the saving.

HEALTHY BOUNDARIES AS LOVE, NOT SELFISHNESS

I need to address the biggest lie that keeps ministers trapped in codependency: **The lie that boundaries are selfish.**

Many of us were taught that good Christians, especially good ministers, have no boundaries. That saying "no" is unloving. That self-care is self-indulgent. That boundaries are evidence of a hard heart.

This is toxic theology. And it's destroying ministers.

Boundaries are not selfish. Boundaries are essential for sustainable, healthy ministry.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Let me be very clear about what boundaries are and aren't:

WHAT BOUNDARIES ARE:

Boundaries are limits you set to protect your capacity to function. They're not walls that keep everyone out. They're fences that define where you end and others begin.

Examples of healthy ministry boundaries:

Time boundaries: "I'm available for pastoral care between these hours. Outside these hours, call the emergency line." This isn't selfish—it's sustainable.

Emotional boundaries: "I care deeply about your situation. And I need you to work with a therapist for the deeper processing. I can offer pastoral support, but I'm not equipped to be your therapist." This isn't abandonment—it's appropriate.

Physical boundaries: "I need a day off each week to rest and be with my family. That day is sacred and non-negotiable except for true emergencies." This isn't lazy—it's wisdom.

Scope boundaries: "I can help you with spiritual direction. For your marriage issues, you need a marriage counselor. For your addiction, you need a recovery program. I'll walk alongside you as your pastor, but I can't be everything." This isn't uncaring—it's honest.

Relational boundaries: "Our relationship is pastor-parishioner. I care about you, but I can't be your close personal friend while I'm your pastor. That creates conflicts of interest." This isn't cold—it's protective.

WHAT BOUNDARIES ARE NOT:

Boundaries are not: Refusing to help anyone ever, being unavailable in genuine emergencies, lacking compassion, being rigid and inflexible, using "boundaries" as an excuse to avoid uncomfortable ministry.

The purpose of boundaries is to maintain your capacity to serve.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Think about it this way: If you work yourself to exhaustion, you can't serve anyone. If you have no time for your own spiritual life, you have nothing to offer others. If you sacrifice your marriage for ministry, you lose credibility to counsel marriages. If you ignore your mental health, you model terrible self-care.

Boundaries aren't about serving less. They're about serving sustainably.

Parker Palmer captures this perfectly: "Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others."

You are the gift. Your health, your wholeness, your capacity—that's the gift. If you destroy the gift, you have nothing left to offer.

How to set healthy boundaries:

- 1. Know your limits.** How many hours can you work before you're ineffective? How many counseling sessions can you do in a week? What drains you? What refills you? Know yourself.
- 2. Communicate boundaries clearly.** Don't expect people to guess. "I'm available for pastoral care on these days during these hours. For emergencies outside those times, here's the process."
- 3. Hold boundaries consistently.** If you set a boundary and then violate it whenever someone pushes, you're teaching them that your boundaries don't matter. Be consistent.
- 4. Don't over-explain or apologize.** "I'm not available this evening" is sufficient. You don't need to justify, defend, or apologize for having limits.
- 5. Expect pushback.** People who benefited from your boundaryless state will resist boundaries. That's okay. Hold firm.
- 6. Have support.** Setting boundaries is hard, especially if you've never had them. Your therapist, spiritual director, peer group can help you hold them.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

7. Remember: Boundaries are an act of love. For yourself, for your family, for the people you serve (who need you to be healthy), and for God (whose gift you're stewarding).

I learned this the hard way. For years, I had no boundaries. I was available 24/7. I never said no. I sacrificed my family constantly. I worked myself to collapse.

And you know what? It didn't make me a better minister. It made me a worse one. I was exhausted, resentful, burning out. My family suffered. My health suffered. And honestly, my ministry suffered because I had nothing left to give.

When I finally learned to set boundaries—to have a Sabbath, to limit my hours, to refer people out when appropriate, to say "no" without guilt—my ministry actually improved. I had more energy. I was more present. I could serve from fullness instead of depletion.

Boundaries aren't selfish. They're an essential part of sustainable ministry.

SELF-CARE AS SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

Let me take this a step further: **Self-care isn't just acceptable—it's a spiritual discipline.**

Most ministers don't think of self-care in these terms. We think of spiritual disciplines as prayer, fasting, Scripture reading, solitude, worship. We don't think of sleep, exercise, therapy, hobbies, or time off as spiritual disciplines.

But they are.

Because you cannot give what you don't have. And if you're not taking care of yourself, you have nothing to give.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Look at Jesus' pattern:

Mark 1:35-38 (NASB): "In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there. Simon and his companions searched for Him; they found Him, and said to Him, 'Everyone is looking for You.' He said to them, 'Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for.'"

Notice what Jesus does: He withdraws. To pray. To be alone. To rest.

And notice what's happening: "Everyone is looking for You." There are pressing needs. People want Him. Ministry demands are high.

And Jesus... leaves.

He doesn't say, "I can't rest while people need me." He doesn't say, "It would be selfish to take time away." He doesn't work Himself to exhaustion trying to meet every need.

He withdraws. He rests. He prays. He reconnects with the Father. And then He ministers from that place of fullness.

This is the pattern for all ministry:

Withdrawal → Rest → Connection with God → Service from fullness

Not: Constant service → Depletion → Burnout → Collapse

Jesus practiced self-care. He slept. He ate. He had friends. He took breaks. He said no to demands. He set boundaries. He withdrew when He needed to.

If Jesus needed self-care, why do you think you don't?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

What self-care looks like practically:

Physical care: Adequate sleep. Regular exercise. Healthy eating. Medical checkups. Time off when you're sick.

Emotional care: Therapy when needed. Safe friendships. Processing feelings. Healthy outlets for stress.

Mental care: Reading for pleasure, not just work. Hobbies. Activities that engage your mind differently. Continuing education that interests you.

Spiritual care: Personal prayer time that's not sermon prep. Worship where you're not leading. Spiritual direction. Retreats. Sabbath.

Relational care: Protected time with family. Friendships that aren't ministry-related. Date nights with your spouse. Play time with your kids.

Recreational care: Activities you enjoy. Hobbies. Sports. Art. Music. Whatever refills you.

Ruth Haley Barton writes: "There is no good that will not ultimately become a destroyer of our souls if it distracts us from seeking God first."

Even ministry—good, necessary, God-honoring ministry—can become a destroyer of your soul if it distracts you from your own relationship with God. If you're so busy serving God that you have no time to be with God, something is very wrong.

Self-care is not selfish. It's stewardship. It's honoring God by taking care of the person He made you to be.

KNOWING WHEN TO REFER, WHEN TO RETREAT

One of the most important skills in ministry is knowing your limits and knowing when to refer people out or when to step back yourself.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

When to REFER:

When the issue is outside your expertise. You're a pastor, not a therapist. You can offer spiritual guidance and pastoral support. But clinical depression, trauma, addiction, serious marriage problems—these require professional help. Refer to licensed therapists.

When you don't have capacity. If you're already carrying a full load and someone needs significant time and attention, it's okay to say, "I don't have capacity to give you the attention you deserve. Let me connect you with someone who does."

When there's a conflict of interest. You can't counsel your staff member about problems with you. You can't counsel your family members. You can't counsel people you're in dual relationships with. Refer out.

When you're too enmeshed. If you find yourself thinking about them constantly, losing sleep over them, unable to maintain boundaries—you're too enmeshed to help effectively. Refer to someone who has appropriate distance.

When you're triggered. If their situation triggers your own unhealed wounds, if you find yourself over-identifying, if you're having emotional flashbacks—step back. Get support for yourself. Refer them to someone who can be more objective.

When they need specialized help. Suicide risk assessment. Trauma therapy. Addiction treatment. Eating disorders. Domestic violence. These require specialized training. Don't try to handle what you're not equipped for.

How to refer well:

Don't just say "You need a therapist" and leave them to figure it out. Have a list of referrals. Help them make the first call. Follow up to make sure they connected. Continue pastoral support while they're in therapy.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

When to RETREAT:

When you're depleted. If you're running on empty, you need to step back and refill. This might mean taking a day off, a week off, or a sabbatical depending on the depletion.

When you're burning out. The warning signs: chronic exhaustion, cynicism, decreased effectiveness, physical symptoms, resentment, isolation. Step back before you collapse.

When you're experiencing vicarious trauma. If you're absorbing others' trauma to the point where you're having symptoms (nightmares, hypervigilance, avoidance, emotional numbing)—you need to retreat, get help, process your own exposure.

When your personal life is in crisis. If you're going through divorce, serious illness, family crisis, your own mental health emergency—you need to step back from ministry and take care of yourself. You can't pour from an empty cup.

When you're compromised. If you're in active addiction, unaddressed mental illness, unconfessed sin that's creating integrity issues—step back, get help, address what needs addressing before resuming ministry.

How to retreat well:

Don't just disappear. Communicate clearly with your leadership. Arrange for coverage. Let people know you're taking time for self-care, not abandoning them. Give a timeframe if possible. Get the help you need.

I've had to do both—refer out and retreat—multiple times in my ministry.

I've referred people to therapists when their issues were beyond my training. I've stepped back from chaplaincy during my own crises. I've taken sabbaticals when I was burning out.

And every time, it felt scary. It felt like failure. It felt like abandonment.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

But it wasn't. It was wisdom. It was stewardship. It was recognizing my limits and honoring them.

Knowing when to refer and when to retreat is not weakness. It's wisdom.

THE OXYGEN MASK PRINCIPLE

You know the instructions on airplanes: "Put on your own oxygen mask before helping others."

Why? Because if you pass out from lack of oxygen, you can't help anyone. You become another casualty requiring rescue.

The same principle applies in ministry: You have to maintain your own oxygen—your own spiritual/emotional/physical health—before you can effectively help others.

But we resist this in ministry. We think:

- "But people are dying! I can't stop to put on my mask!"
- "It's selfish to take care of myself when others need help!"
- "I'll tend to myself after I've helped everyone else!"

No. If you don't put on your own oxygen mask first, you'll pass out and become useless to everyone.

What is your "oxygen"? What keeps you alive and functional?

For me, it's:

- Regular therapy to process my own stuff
- Spiritual direction to tend my soul
- Time with my wife and family
- Exercise and adequate sleep
- Sabbath—a full day off every week, non-negotiable
- Hobbies that have nothing to do with ministry
- Friends who know me as Jeff, not Pastor Jeff
- Ongoing recovery work for my codependency

THE WOUNDED HEALER

These aren't luxuries. These are my oxygen. Without them, I can't function. Without them, I can't serve.

What's your oxygen? What do you need to function? And are you getting it?

How to practice the oxygen mask principle:

1. Identify your oxygen. What refills you? What keeps you healthy? What do you need to function well?

Make a list.

2. Protect it fiercely. Your oxygen is not negotiable. It's not optional. It's not something you do "if you have time." It's essential. Schedule it. Guard it. Defend it.

3. Don't feel guilty about it. Putting on your oxygen mask isn't selfish—it's necessary for you to be able to help anyone. Release the guilt.

4. Recognize when you're oxygen-deprived. What are your symptoms of depletion? Irritability? Exhaustion? Cynicism? Learn to recognize them and respond immediately.

5. Have a plan for when you've been oxygen-deprived too long. Sometimes a day off isn't enough. Sometimes you need a week, or a month, or a sabbatical. Know your options.

6. Model this for your congregation. When you take Sabbath seriously, when you set boundaries, when you practice self-care—you're teaching your congregation that it's okay for them to do the same.

Matthew 11:28-30 (NASB): "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Jesus invites the weary to rest. His yoke is easy. His burden is light.

If your ministry feels like a crushing burden, if you're drowning in demands, if you have no rest—you're not carrying Jesus' yoke. You're carrying something else. Probably a codependent, boundary-less, savior-complex-driven yoke that's destroying you.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Jesus' yoke is easy. His burden is light. That's the standard.

If your ministry doesn't reflect that, something needs to change.

PRACTICAL TOOL: CODEPENDENCY VS. COMPASSION ASSESSMENT

Use this assessment to evaluate whether your ministry is coming from healthy compassion or unhealthy codependency:

MOTIVATIONS

- Codependent:** I need to feel needed. My worth comes from being the rescuer. **Compassionate:** I'm secure in my worth and serve from overflow, not need.
- Codependent:** I can't tolerate people struggling. I have to fix everything. **Compassionate:** I can sit with struggle without needing to fix it immediately.
- Codependent:** I'm using ministry to avoid my own problems. **Compassionate:** I've addressed my own issues and serve from a healed place.

BOUNDARIES

- Codependent:** I have no time boundaries. I'm available 24/7. **Compassionate:** I have clear time boundaries that protect my health and family.
- Codependent:** I can't say no without intense guilt. **Compassionate:** I can say no when appropriate without shame.
- Codependent:** I work myself to exhaustion regularly. **Compassionate:** I maintain sustainable rhythms that allow me to serve long-term.

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RELATIONSHIPS

- Codependent:** People are very dependent on me. They can't function without me. **Compassionate:** I empower people to develop multiple sources of support.
- Codependent:** I can't distinguish between their feelings and my feelings. **Compassionate:** I have empathy without enmeshment. I maintain emotional boundaries.
- Codependent:** I share inappropriately about my own life to create connection. **Compassionate:** I share appropriately and maintain professional boundaries.

EMOTIONAL STATE

- Codependent:** I'm constantly thinking about the people I'm serving, even off hours. **Compassionate:** I can be present when serving and detached when not.
- Codependent:** I lose sleep worrying about people's problems. **Compassionate:** I trust God with people's outcomes and can sleep at night.
- Codependent:** I feel responsible for everyone's emotional state. **Compassionate:** I recognize people are responsible for their own emotions.

OUTCOMES

- Codependent:** I feel responsible for people's choices and outcomes. **Compassionate:** I recognize I can influence but not control outcomes.
- Codependent:** When people fail or relapse, I feel like I failed. **Compassionate:** I can separate their choices from my effectiveness.
- Codependent:** I keep people dependent rather than moving them toward independence. **Compassionate:** I work myself out of a job by empowering people toward self-sufficiency.

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SELF-CARE

- Codependent:** I rarely or never take time for myself. It feels selfish. **Compassionate:** I regularly engage in self-care as spiritual discipline.
- Codependent:** I sacrifice my family constantly for ministry. **Compassionate:** I protect family time and prioritize those relationships.
- Codependent:** I don't have a therapist or spiritual director. I "should" be able to handle it myself. **Compassionate:** I have regular professional support for my own processing.

REFERRALS

- Codependent:** I believe I'm the only one who can really help certain people. **Compassionate:** I refer out when appropriate and celebrate others' contributions.
- Codependent:** I take on cases outside my expertise because they need me. **Compassionate:** I stay in my lane and refer to specialists as needed.

SCORING:

Count how many of each you checked:

Mostly Codependent: Your ministry is likely driven by unhealthy patterns. Get professional help. Consider a break from ministry to address your codependency. Read books on codependency recovery. Find a therapist who specializes in this.

Mix of Both: You're aware of the issues but still falling into codependent patterns sometimes. Keep working on boundaries. Get support. Be vigilant about your motivations.

Mostly Compassionate: You're serving from a healthy place. Keep maintaining boundaries, self-care, and support systems. Model this for others.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE MINISTRY PRACTICES

So how do you actually build a ministry that's compassionate without being codependent? Here are practical strategies:

- 1. Develop a rhythm of work and rest.** Schedule Sabbath weekly. Take vacation annually. Consider sabbatical every 5-7 years. Build rest into your schedule, don't just hope for it.
- 2. Create a community of care around yourself.** Therapist, spiritual director, peer group, close friends. Don't try to do this alone.
- 3. Set clear availability boundaries.** Office hours for appointments. Emergency protocol for after hours. Clear communication about when you're available and when you're not.
- 4. Build a team approach.** Don't be the only source of support. Connect people to multiple resources—other pastors, counselors, support groups, recovery programs.
- 5. Practice appropriate self-disclosure.** Share your scars when it serves them, not to process your own stuff. Keep it brief, relevant, and boundaried.
- 6. Learn to sit with discomfort.** People can struggle. People can face consequences. People can be uncomfortable. You don't have to rescue them from natural outcomes.
- 7. Release outcomes to God.** You're responsible for faithfulness, not results. Do your part well, and trust God with the rest.
- 8. Address your own codependency.** This isn't just about learning techniques. This is about healing the wounds that drive codependent patterns. Get therapy. Do recovery work.
- 9. Model healthy boundaries.** Your congregation learns from you. If you model sustainable ministry, you give them permission to live sustainable lives.
- 10. Remember: You're not the Savior.** Jesus is. Your job is to point to Him, not to be Him.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

THE INVITATION TO SUSTAINABLE SERVICE

The rescue paradox is real: You can't save others if you're drowning too.

And here's what I've learned after years of codependent ministry followed by years of recovery: **Healthy boundaries and sustainable practices don't make you less compassionate—they make you more effective.**

When I had no boundaries, I was exhausted, resentful, and burning out. I was helping people in the short term while destroying myself in the long term. And honestly, I was creating dependency rather than empowerment.

Now, with boundaries, with self-care, with sustainable practices—I can serve for the long haul. I can be present without being enmeshed. I can have compassion without codependency. I can help people without drowning myself.

This is the invitation: Learn to serve from fullness, not depletion. From health, not woundedness. From compassion, not codependency.

Put on your oxygen mask first. Set boundaries that protect your capacity. Practice self-care as spiritual discipline. Know when to refer and when to retreat. Release the savior complex. Trust God to be the Savior.

You can have compassion without codependency. You can minister from scars without drowning in others' wounds. You can serve sustainably for the long haul.

But it requires letting go of the patterns that have driven you, healing the wounds that created them, and learning entirely new ways of being in ministry.

It's worth it. You're worth it. The people you serve are worth it.

Welcome to sustainable ministry.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Complete the Codependency vs. Compassion Assessment honestly. What did it reveal? Where are you falling into codependent patterns? Think about the rescue paradox. Where are you currently drowning while trying to rescue others? What needs to change? Examine your motivations: Do you need to be needed? Is your worth tied to being the rescuer? Where is ministry meeting your needs rather than serving others' needs? What's the difference between empathy and enmeshment in your ministry? Can you identify times you've crossed from one to the other? Do you have a savior complex or messiah identity? How does believing "they need me" serve you? What would happen if you let go of that? What are your current boundaries (or lack thereof)? What boundaries do you need to set? What's stopping you? What is your "oxygen"—what do you need to function? Are you getting it regularly? If not, what's your plan to change that? When was the last time you referred someone out or retreated for your own health? What keeps you from doing these things when needed?

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." — Matthew 11:28-30 (NASB)

Jesus' yoke is easy.

His burden is light.

If yours isn't, you're carrying something that isn't His.

Put down the codependency.

Put down the savior complex.

Put down the boundary-less exhaustion.

Pick up compassion with boundaries.

Pick up service from fullness.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Pick up sustainable ministry.

You can have compassion without codependency.

You can serve without drowning.

You can minister from scars without falling back into wounds.

But you have to put on your oxygen mask first.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 13: The Ministry of Presence

I sat beside the hospital bed, looking at what was left of a man I'd known for fifteen years. Third-degree burns over 60% of his body. The explosion at the industrial site had been catastrophic. Three workers dead. Two others critical. Mike was one of the critical.

He was unconscious, sedated, intubated. Machines breathing for him. Machines monitoring every vital sign. His family in the waiting room, shell-shocked, terrified. The medical team doing everything humanly possible.

And I was just... sitting there.

As a chaplain, I'd been called to the burn unit. The family had requested me specifically—Mike and I had served together years ago on the fire department. They wanted someone who knew him, who'd been in fire, who understood what this was.

But there was nothing I could do. I couldn't heal the burns. I couldn't ease the pain. I couldn't guarantee an outcome. I couldn't even pray out loud—he was unconscious.

I could just be there.

So I sat. In the chair beside his bed. With my hand resting near his (I couldn't touch him—the burns were too severe). In silence. For two hours.

At one point, a nurse came in to check his vitals. She looked at me, looked at my chaplain badge, and asked gently, "Do you need to go? You've been here a while."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

"No," I said. "I'm exactly where I need to be."

She nodded, understanding something that can't be explained to people who've never sat vigil. "He's lucky to have you."

But I wasn't doing anything. I was just there.

Later, when Mike's wife came in to see him, she saw me sitting there and burst into tears. Not the tears of fresh grief—she'd been crying all day. Different tears. Relief tears.

"You came," she said. "You're here."

"Of course I'm here," I said.

"But you're just... sitting."

"Yeah."

"You're not trying to make it better. You're not saying it's going to be okay. You're not quoting Bible verses. You're just... here."

"Yeah."

She sat down in the other chair. We sat together in silence for another hour. Not talking. Not praying out loud. Not doing anything productive.

Just being there. Together. In the presence of suffering we couldn't fix.

That's when I understood something I'd been learning in my years of chaplaincy but had never quite articulated: **Sometimes the ministry is just showing up. Sometimes presence is enough. Sometimes being with someone in their pain matters more than doing anything for them.**

THE WOUNDED HEALER

This is the ministry of presence. And it's one of the most powerful—and most difficult—forms of ministry there is.

Because everything in us wants to fix, to solve, to make it better. Everything in ministry culture tells us we should have answers, should offer hope, should do something productive.

But sometimes—often—the most faithful, most powerful, most needed thing we can do is just show up and be present.

Not doing. Just being.

And for those of us who've built our identity on being useful, on doing, on fixing—this is incredibly hard.

But it's also the most incarnational form of ministry there is.

THE INCARNATIONAL MODEL: GOD'S MINISTRY OF PRESENCE

The theological foundation for the ministry of presence is the Incarnation itself.

"And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14, NASB).

God didn't fix humanity from a distance. He showed up.

Think about that for a moment. The Almighty God, Creator of the universe, could have solved the human problem any number of ways from His throne in heaven. He could have spoken and made it right. He could have sent messages, revelations, instructions. He could have fixed us without getting personally involved.

But He didn't.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

He became flesh. He dwelt among us. He showed up in person.

The Incarnation is God's ultimate ministry of presence.

Jesus didn't spend His earthly ministry constantly doing miracles and fixing every problem. He spent most of His time just being with people. Present to them. Available to them. Walking alongside them.

Yes, He healed. Yes, He taught. Yes, He performed miracles. But the foundation of His ministry was presence—being Emmanuel, "God with us."

He ate with sinners. Not fixing them first, just sharing meals. Being present at their tables.

He wept with the grieving. When Lazarus died, Jesus wept—even though He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead. He didn't skip the grief and go straight to the miracle. He was present to the pain first.

He let a woman wash His feet with her tears. He received her ministry of presence without rushing to make her feel better or telling her to stop crying.

He stayed in Gethsemane with His disciples. Asked them to watch with Him. Wanted their presence in His darkest hour.

He remained on the cross for hours. Didn't rush the suffering. Stayed in it. Present to the full experience of human pain.

The pattern of Jesus' ministry is presence first, action second. Being with before doing for.

And when we rush to fix, to solve, to offer answers—we're actually violating the incarnational model. We're trying to help from a distance when what people need is presence up close.

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I learned this painfully in my early ministry. I was so uncomfortable with suffering that I always rushed to fix it. Someone sharing grief? I'd immediately offer comfort and hope, trying to move them past the pain. Someone expressing doubt? I'd launch into apologetics and reassurance. Someone sitting in darkness? I'd try to flip on all the lights.

I was so busy doing for them that I couldn't just be with them.

It took sitting with first responders in trauma—situations where there was literally nothing I could do, nothing I could fix, no answers I could offer—to learn that presence is enough. That sometimes being with is more powerful than doing for.

The Incarnation teaches us: Presence is not passive. Presence is powerful. God's presence with us is the foundation of everything else.

Before He fixed anything, He showed up.

BEING WITH VS. DOING FOR

Let me make a crucial distinction that changed how I do ministry:

DOING FOR:

Focus: Fixing the problem, solving the issue, making the pain go away

Characteristics:

- Action-oriented
- Looks productive
- Makes the helper feel useful
- Often about the helper's need to fix things
- Can create dependency
- Moves quickly, avoids dwelling in pain
- Focuses on solutions

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Language:

- "Here's what you should do..."
- "Have you tried...?"
- "Let me fix this for you..."
- "Everything's going to be okay..."
- "Look on the bright side..."

What it communicates:

- Your pain makes me uncomfortable
- I need to make this better so I can feel better
- I can't sit with you in this
- There's a solution and I have it
- You need me to rescue you

When it's appropriate:

- Practical problems that actually need solving
- Situations where you have expertise they need
- When they explicitly ask for advice or help
- After you've done the work of being present first

BEING WITH:

Focus: Accompanying the person in their experience, whatever it is

Characteristics:

- Presence-oriented
- Looks "unproductive" but is deeply powerful
- Requires tolerating discomfort
- About the sufferer's need, not the helper's
- Empowers the person to find their own way
- Stays with the pain as long as needed
- Focuses on witness, not solutions

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Language:

- "I'm here."
- "Tell me what this is like for you."
- "I'm not going anywhere."
- (Silence)
- "This is really hard."

What it communicates:

- Your pain doesn't scare me
- I can sit with you in this
- You don't have to protect me from your feelings
- I trust you to find your way with support
- You're not alone

When it's appropriate:

- Acute grief and loss
- Trauma processing
- Existential questions
- Dark nights of the soul
- Any situation where there's no quick fix
- When they need witness, not solutions

Let me tell you the difference through a story:

DOING FOR: A pastor whose teenage son just died comes to me. Old me would have: Offered theological explanations for suffering. Quoted Romans 8:28. Assured him God has a plan. Prayed for comfort and peace. Given him books about grief. Stayed for 30 minutes and felt like I'd "helped."

BEING WITH: Same situation. Current me: Sits with him in silence. Lets him rage at God without correcting his theology. Stays when he says, "I don't know if I believe anymore." Weeps with him. Doesn't offer explanations or solutions. Doesn't quote Scripture unless he asks. Just remains present. Stays for three hours. Leaves feeling like I did nothing—but knowing presence was everything.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The first approach made me feel useful. The second approach felt uncomfortable, unproductive, like I wasn't doing anything.

But the pastor later told me: "Everyone else tried to make it better. You were the only one who let me be broken. And that's what I needed."

Being with is harder than doing for. It requires:

Tolerating discomfort. You can't fix their pain, so you have to sit in it with them. That's uncomfortable.

Releasing your need to be useful. You're not doing anything productive. You're just being there. That can feel pointless.

Trusting the process. You have to believe that presence itself is powerful, even when you can't see immediate results.

Managing your own anxiety. Their suffering might trigger your own pain, your own fears, your own unresolved issues. You have to stay grounded.

Respecting their timeline. They get to be in their pain as long as they need. You don't get to rush them toward healing.

Giving up control. You can't control their outcome. You can only accompany them in their process.

Being with is the harder path. But it's the more faithful path. It's the incarnational path.

THE POWER OF SHARED SILENCE

One of the most powerful aspects of the ministry of presence is shared silence.

Our culture is terrified of silence. We fill every space with noise, with words, with distraction. Silence feels awkward, uncomfortable, empty.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

But in ministry, especially ministry to people in deep pain, silence is sacred.

Shared silence communicates:

"You don't have to perform for me." You don't have to make conversation, explain yourself, or make me comfortable. You can just be.

"I'm not afraid of your pain." Your silence doesn't scare me. Your lack of words doesn't make me uncomfortable enough to fill the space.

"I trust the silence to hold us." I believe God is present in the silence, that something sacred is happening even when nothing is being said.

"I'm paying attention." Silence requires presence. You can't be truly present if you're constantly talking.

Simone Weil, the French philosopher and mystic, wrote: "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity."

Silence is attention. Deep, focused, generous attention.

I've sat in silence with:

- A firefighter after a particularly traumatic call, both of us staring at nothing, no words needed
- A mother whose daughter had just been murdered, sitting in her living room for an hour saying almost nothing
- A man dying of cancer, holding his hand, breathing together in silence
- A minister who'd just been fired, both of us just being in the pain together

In each case, the silence wasn't empty. It was full. Full of presence. Full of witness. Full of solidarity. Full of the understanding that sometimes there are no words, and that's okay.

How to practice sacred silence:

Don't rush to fill it. When silence comes, resist the urge to break it with words. Let it be.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Be truly present. Silence is only powerful if you're actually there, actually paying attention, actually with them. If you're just sitting quietly while thinking about your to-do list, that's not sacred silence—that's just awkward quiet.

Notice what silence communicates. Sometimes silence says "I have no words." Sometimes it says "I'm processing." Sometimes it says "I need you here but I can't talk." Learn to read it.

Use silence to create space for them. If you're constantly talking, they can't get a word in. Silence gives them room to speak if they need to, or to simply be if they don't.

Let silence do its work. In silence, things can surface that words would cover up. Emotions can be felt that conversation would distract from. God can speak in ways that our words would drown out.

Trust that silence is enough. You don't have to say something profound. You don't have to have the right words. Your presence in silence is sufficient.

I remember sitting with a fellow firefighter—a guy I'd served with for years—after a particularly horrific accident scene involving children. We sat in my truck for probably 45 minutes. We barely said ten words to each other. Just sat there in silence.

Finally, as he was getting out, he said, "Thanks, man."

"For what? I didn't do anything."

"You sat with me. You didn't try to make it better. You just let it be what it was."

That's the power of shared silence. Not doing anything. Just being together in what is.

WHY YOUR PRESENCE MATTERS MORE THAN YOUR ANSWERS

Here's a hard truth for those of us who've built our ministry identity on having answers: **People in deep pain don't need your answers. They need your presence.**

THE WOUNDED HEALER

When someone is in acute crisis—in the depths of grief, in the darkness of depression, in the aftermath of trauma—they're not looking for theological explanations. They're not ready for five-step solutions. They're not able to receive your wisdom.

What they need is someone to be with them in it. Someone who won't abandon them in their darkness. Someone who can sit with them without needing to fix them.

Your answers—no matter how true, how biblical, how helpful they might eventually be—are noise if they come before presence.

I learned this through multiple painful experiences where I offered answers too soon:

The young mother whose baby died. I showed up and immediately started talking about heaven, about God's sovereignty, about how her baby was in a better place. All true things. All orthodox theology. All absolutely the wrong thing to say in that moment.

What she needed was someone to weep with her. To acknowledge the horror of what happened. To let her rage and question and doubt without correcting her theology.

My answers came from my discomfort with her pain. I needed to make it better so I could feel better. My theology was a shield against feeling the full weight of her grief.

The pastor who'd been fired unjustly. I tried to encourage him with "God has a plan" and "He's preparing you for something better." Again, possibly true. But way too soon.

What he needed was someone to acknowledge the injustice. To sit with his anger. To validate that what happened was wrong, not rush him to "but God will work it out."

My answers came from my need to find the silver lining, to make sense of it, to offer hope. But premature hope is just denial.

The firefighter with PTSD. I offered all kinds of advice about therapy, about coping strategies, about managing triggers. All potentially helpful information. All delivered too soon.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

What he needed first was someone to hear his story. To bear witness to what he'd experienced. To let him know he wasn't weak or broken or crazy—he was traumatized, and that's different.

My answers came from my discomfort with sitting in trauma. I wanted to move to solutions so I didn't have to stay in the pain.

In each case, I got it wrong by offering answers before offering presence.

Here's what I've learned:

Presence first. Answers later. Maybe much later.

The timeline goes like this:

1. Immediate crisis: Presence only. Just be there. Witness. Sit with. Hold space. Don't try to make sense of it. Don't offer explanations. Just be.

2. Early grief/trauma: Still mostly presence. Maybe a few words of solidarity. Maybe acknowledgment of how terrible it is. Still not answers or explanations.

3. Processing stage: They're starting to ask questions. They might be ready for some gentle input. But still lead with presence, follow with answers—and only if they ask.

4. Integration stage: Now they might be ready for answers, for theology, for making meaning. But even here, presence remains the foundation.

Too many ministers skip straight to stage 4 when people are in stage 1. And it's not helpful—it's actually harmful.

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

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The people who mean most aren't those who had the best answers. They're those who were most present.

VULNERABILITY AS INVITATION

Here's something powerful about the ministry of presence: **Your willingness to be vulnerable—to show your own scars, to admit your own struggles, to be honest about your own humanity—creates invitation for others to be vulnerable too.**

When you show up with your scars visible, you're saying: "I'm not here as the expert who has it all together. I'm here as a fellow human who knows what suffering is like."

That invitation is powerful.

Think about it: If I show up to sit with someone in pain and I'm performing invulnerability—projecting strength, offering certainty, maintaining professional distance—what am I communicating? "I'm fine. You should be fine. Let me help you get back to fine."

But if I show up with my scars visible—not dominating the conversation with my story, but not hiding my humanity either—what am I communicating? "I know what pain is like. I know what struggle is like. You can be real with me."

Vulnerability invites vulnerability.

When I sit with a depressed person and I mention, "I know what that darkness feels like. I've been there"—their whole body language changes. They're not alone. They're not weird. Someone gets it.

When I sit with a minister who's burned out and I say, "Yeah, I've been there too. The exhaustion that no amount of sleep fixes. The resentment. The wondering if God even cares. I know"—they can finally exhale. They can finally be honest.

When I sit with someone grieving and I say, "I lost someone too. And I know there are no words. So I'm just here"—they don't have to perform strength for me.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

My scars create safe space for their wounds.

But—and this is crucial—this is not about making it about you.

Appropriate vulnerability in the ministry of presence looks like:

Brief acknowledgment: "I've experienced something similar. I know how devastating this is."

Creating safety: "You can be completely honest with me. I won't judge you or try to fix you. I've been in dark places too."

Normalizing: "What you're feeling is normal. I felt it too. You're not weak or faithless or broken."

Offering hope through testimony: "I didn't think I'd survive it. But I did. And you will too."

Inappropriate vulnerability looks like:

Taking over the conversation: Spending more time talking about your experience than listening to theirs.

Competing in suffering: "You think that's bad? Let me tell you what happened to me..."

Processing your own stuff: Using their pain as an opportunity to work through your unresolved issues.

Creating obligation: Making them comfort you or take care of you emotionally.

The key is: Your vulnerability serves them, not you. You're being honest about your humanity to create space for theirs, not to process your own pain.

I've learned to share just enough of my scars to create connection and credibility, then turn the focus back to them. "I know what depression is like, which is why I understand what you're going through. Tell me what it's like for you."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Vulnerability is invitation. But invitation is about welcoming them in, not about making them attend to you.

PERSONAL STORIES: WHEN PRESENCE WAS EVERYTHING

Let me tell you about some chaplaincy moments where I didn't have answers, didn't have solutions, didn't do anything productive—but presence was everything.

THE OFFICER-INVOLVED SHOOTING

I wrote about this in Chapter 11, but let me add detail. That young officer who'd shot and killed someone—I sat with him for two hours. I didn't pray eloquent prayers. I didn't quote Scripture. I didn't offer theological explanations for why bad things happen.

I sat with him in his cruiser. Let him tell the story over and over (that's what trauma does—you repeat it, trying to process it). Let him cry. Let him shake. Let him be silent. Told him a bit about my own PTSD. Told him he wasn't weak or broken. Gave him resources for getting help.

But mostly, I just sat with him. Present to his trauma. Not fixing it. Not explaining it. Just bearing witness to it.

A week later, he showed up at my office. "I need to tell you something," he said. "That night, when you sat with me—I'd been thinking about eating my gun. Going home and ending it. Because I couldn't live with what I'd done."

"But you sat there, with your scars visible, and you didn't try to make it better. You just let me be in it. And somehow that gave me permission to survive it. If you could survive your trauma, maybe I could survive mine."

I didn't know. I had no idea he was that close to the edge. But presence—just showing up and being with him—kept him alive that night.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

THE MOTHER IN THE ICU

Her 19-year-old daughter had been in a car accident. Brain dead. The family had made the decision to donate organs. They were waiting for the transplant teams to arrive.

I sat with the mother in the ICU room for six hours. She talked. I listened. She cried. I cried with her. She was silent. I was silent too. She raged at God. I didn't defend God—I just listened to her rage.

At one point, she looked at me and said, "Why aren't you telling me everything happens for a reason? Why aren't you telling me God needed another angel? Why aren't you making this okay?"

"Because it's not okay," I said. "Your daughter is dying. That's not okay. It's not part of some plan. It's tragedy. And I'm not going to pretend otherwise."

She nodded. "Thank you. Everyone else keeps trying to make it better. You're the first person who's just let it be what it is."

I didn't do anything. I just stayed. But that presence—bearing witness to her pain without trying to spiritualize it away—mattered.

THE FIREFIGHTER WITH PTSD

A brother from another department—guy I'd never met before—reached out after hearing I did chaplaincy work with first responders. He was having flashbacks, panic attacks, couldn't sleep. Twenty years on the job and he'd seen too much.

We met at a coffee shop. He told me about the calls that haunted him. The child drownings. The burn victims. The suicides. The accidents. Twenty years of trauma with no processing.

I didn't offer advice. I didn't give him coping strategies. I didn't try to fix his PTSD.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

I just listened. For three hours. Let him purge the stories he'd never told anyone. Let him cry in a public coffee shop without shame. Let him know he wasn't weak or broken—he was carrying the cumulative weight of two decades of trauma, and that weight is real.

At the end, he said, "I don't feel better. I still have all the same problems. But I feel less alone. And that's something."

That's the ministry of presence. Not making it better. Just making them less alone.

THE PASTOR'S WIFE IN CRISIS

She reached out through my Beloved Rising ministry—pastor's wife, married to a senior pastor at a large church. She was suicidal. Not because of depression (though she was depressed). Because she'd lost herself completely in being "the pastor's wife." She had no identity, no boundaries, no life of her own. She existed to support his ministry.

And she wanted to die.

We met weekly for three months. I didn't try to fix her marriage. I didn't give her five steps to find herself. I didn't offer easy answers.

I just created space for her to be honest. To say things she'd never been allowed to say. To rage at the expectations. To grieve the lost self. To be broken without having to perform strength.

The turning point came when she said, "You're the first person who hasn't told me what I should do. Everyone else has answers. You just let me figure it out while you sit with me."

"Because it's your life," I said. "I can't tell you what to do with it. I can just be with you while you figure it out."

She's still married. Still a pastor's wife. But she's building a self that's not consumed by that role. She's learning boundaries. She's developing her own identity. She's surviving.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

And what helped wasn't my advice. It was my presence.

THE INCARNATIONAL PRACTICE: SHOWING UP AS YOURSELF

Here's the practical application of all this: **The ministry of presence requires showing up as your actual self, not as your pastoral persona.**

Pastoral persona: The polished, professional, put-together version of yourself that knows what to say, has the answers, maintains appropriate distance.

Actual self: The human being with scars, with questions, with limitations, with genuine presence.

People don't need your pastoral persona in their darkest moments. They need your actual self.

This is scary. Because your actual self is vulnerable. Your actual self doesn't always have answers. Your actual self might not know what to do.

But your actual self can be present in a way your pastoral persona can't.

How to show up as your actual self:

1. Let go of needing to be the expert. You're not there to impress them with your knowledge. You're there to be with them in their pain.

2. Be honest about your limitations. "I don't know what to say. But I'm here." That's okay. That's actually more honest than pretending you have words when you don't.

3. Let them see your humanity. If you're moved to tears, cry. If you don't understand, say so. If you're uncomfortable with silence, sit in it anyway.

4. Don't hide your scars. Not in a way that makes it about you, but in a way that says "I'm human too. I know what suffering is like."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

- 5. Stay present to yourself.** Notice what you're feeling. Notice your own reactions. Don't disconnect from yourself in order to be present to them—that's not real presence.
- 6. Trust that you being there is enough.** You don't have to do anything impressive. You don't have to say anything profound. Your presence is the ministry.

Romans 12:15 (NASB): "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."

Not: Fix those who are broken. Not: Explain to those who are confused. Not: Solve for those who are struggling.

Rejoice with. Weep with. Just be with them in whatever they're experiencing.

That's the incarnational practice. God didn't show up as a theological expert with all the answers. He showed up as a human who wept, who got angry, who felt everything. He showed up as Himself.

We're invited to do the same.

WHEN PRESENCE IS MOST NEEDED

Let me be specific about when the ministry of presence is most crucial:

In acute grief. Immediately after a death, a loss, a devastating diagnosis—people don't need answers. They need someone to sit with them in the shock and pain.

In trauma aftermath. After a traumatic event, people need someone who can bear witness to what happened without trying to make sense of it immediately.

In the dark night of the soul. When someone's faith is shattered, when God feels absent, when nothing makes sense—they need someone who can sit in the darkness without turning on all the lights.

In shame. When someone is carrying deep shame, they need someone who can see the shameful thing and not flinch, not condemn, not pull away.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

In doubt. When someone is questioning everything, they need someone who can let them question without rushing to defend or explain.

In silence. When someone has no words, they need someone who can be comfortable with silence.

In anger. When someone is raging—at God, at circumstances, at injustice—they need someone who can hear the rage without correcting it.

In depression. When someone is in the pit, they need someone who can climb down into the pit with them, not someone standing at the top shouting advice about how to climb out.

In the waiting. When someone is in liminal space—between diagnosis and treatment, between death and burial, between job loss and new opportunity—they need someone who can wait with them.

The pattern is clear: When people are in the depths, they need presence more than anything else.

Later—maybe much later—they might need advice, answers, action. But first, they need someone to be with them where they are.

THE COST OF PRESENCE

I need to be honest: The ministry of presence is costly.

It costs you:

Emotional energy. Being truly present to someone else's pain takes energy. You're not fixing (which can feel energizing) or teaching (which can feel productive). You're just bearing witness. And that's exhausting.

Time. Presence can't be rushed. You can't do the ministry of presence in 15-minute appointments. It takes as long as it takes.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Comfort. Sitting in silence, being with suffering, not having answers—it's uncomfortable. You have to tolerate that discomfort.

Control. You can't control outcomes when you're just being present. You have to release control and trust the process.

Your own wounds. Being present to others' pain will sometimes trigger your own. You'll need support to process what you encounter.

This is why the ministry of presence requires the self-care and boundaries we talked about in Chapter 12. You can't do this work without:

- Your own therapist to process what you encounter
- Your own spiritual director to tend your soul
- Healthy boundaries that protect your capacity
- Regular Sabbath and rest
- A support community that supports you

The ministry of presence is powerful. But it's not infinite. You need to care for yourself so you can continue showing up for others.

THE INVITATION TO PRESENCE

So here's the invitation: **Learn to be with before doing for. Learn to offer presence before offering answers. Learn to show up as yourself, scars and all.**

This might be the hardest form of ministry for those of us who built our identity on being useful, on having answers, on fixing things.

But it's also the most needed, most powerful, most incarnational ministry there is.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Practical commitments for the ministry of presence:

1. **I will show up.** Even when I don't know what to do or say.
2. **I will be present.** Not distracted, not disconnected, not performing.
3. **I will tolerate silence.** I won't fill every space with words.
4. **I will listen more than I speak.** Their story matters more than my wisdom.
5. **I will sit with pain without trying to fix it.** I will trust that presence is enough.
6. **I will show my scars when appropriate.** Not to make it about me, but to create safe space.
7. **I will weep with those who weep.** I will let their pain touch me.
8. **I will stay as long as needed.** I won't rush them or rush myself.
9. **I will trust that presence is ministry.** Even when it doesn't feel productive.
10. **I will care for myself so I can continue showing up.** I will maintain my own oxygen.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Not the Word became advice and fixed us. Not the Word became theology and explained us. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Presence first. Everything else flows from that.

Your scars, visible and integrated, become invitation for others to bring their wounds into the light.

Your willingness to just be with becomes the space where healing becomes possible.

Your presence—imperfect, human, authentic—becomes the incarnational ministry the world desperately needs.

Sometimes the ministry is just showing up with your scars visible.

Sometimes presence is enough.

Sometimes being with matters more than doing for.

Welcome to the ministry of presence.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Think about a time when someone was truly present to you in your pain. What did they do (or not do) that made their presence meaningful? What can you learn from that? Where do you tend toward "doing for" when you should be "being with"? Why is doing more comfortable for you than being? How comfortable are you with silence? Can you sit with someone in pain without filling the space with words? What makes silence difficult for you? When have you offered answers too soon? What drove that need to explain or fix rather than simply be present? How willing are you to show your scars (appropriately) as invitation for others' vulnerability? What keeps you from being authentic in ministry? Read John 1:14 slowly. What does it mean that God's primary response to human brokenness was to show up in person? How does that change your understanding of ministry? Who has modeled the ministry of presence for you? What did you learn from them about just being with people? What would it cost you to practice the ministry of presence more fully? What would need to change? What support would you need?

"And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us." — John 1:14 (NASB)

God's answer to human suffering wasn't a solution delivered from a distance.

It was presence.

Flesh.

Dwelling among us.

Being with us.

That's the pattern.

That's the model.

That's the ministry.

Not doing for.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Being with.

Not answers from on high.

Presence in the depths.

Not fixing from a distance.

Showing up in person.

Sometimes the ministry is just being there.

Sometimes your scars, visible and integrated, create space for their wounds to come into the light.

Sometimes presence is enough.

More than enough.

Everything.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 14: Speaking from Your Scars

I was three years into recovery from my burnout and breakdown when I got invited to speak at a pastors' conference about ministry health and sustainability. The topic was perfect for me—I'd been through the fire, done the healing work, and had practical wisdom to share about avoiding the patterns that had nearly destroyed me.

But I was terrified. Not of public speaking—I'd done plenty of that. I was terrified of what I'd have to share to make the message authentic.

Because to talk honestly about ministry health, I'd have to talk about my ministry collapse. To teach about burnout prevention, I'd have to share about my burnout. To help other pastors avoid my mistakes, I'd have to expose my mistakes.

I sat in my truck in the conference center parking lot, thirty minutes before I was supposed to speak, having a mild panic attack.

What if they judge me? What if they think I'm unqualified? What if sharing my failure damages my credibility? What if I share too much? What if I don't share enough? What if my vulnerability just makes them uncomfortable? What if they use this against me later?

My phone rang. It was my therapist. I'd texted her earlier that I was freaking out.

"You ready for this?" she asked.

"No. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how much to share. I don't know if I should even be doing this."

"Let me ask you something," she said. "Are you sharing your story because you need validation? Or because you genuinely believe it can help them?"

I sat with that question. Honest answer: "Both. I want to help them. But I also... I need them to know I'm not just some guy with a degree and a theory. I need them to know I've been there."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

"Okay," she said. "That's honest. So here's the question: Can you share in a way that serves them without needing anything from them? Can you offer your story as a gift without needing them to affirm you or validate you or make you feel better about what you went through?"

Silence. Because that was the real question. Could I share my scars without needing their response to heal my wounds? Could I offer light without needing the spotlight? Could my testimony be a tool for their growth rather than a trophy for my ego?

"I think so," I finally said. "I'm healed enough to help. I think."

"Then you're ready," she said. "Share what serves them. Keep what's yours. Don't perform vulnerability—be vulnerable in service of their transformation. And remember: Your scars are credentials, not the whole message. Point them to Jesus, not to your survival."

I walked into that conference hall with shaking hands and a clear intention: Share from scars, not wounds. Serve them, don't use them. Offer light, don't seek spotlight.

I told them about my collapse. About the suicidal thoughts. About the patterns that led to burnout. About the healing journey. About what I learned. About what I'd do differently.

And I watched faces change. I saw recognition. I saw relief. I saw several pastors crying—not for me, but because they saw themselves in my story and realized they weren't alone.

After the talk, a line formed. Pastor after pastor sharing quietly, "That's me. I'm where you were. What do I do?"

That's when I understood: **My scars, shared appropriately at the right time to the right people, could open doors that my credentials never would.**

But the key word is *appropriately*. Because sharing your story badly can do as much harm as not sharing it at all.

So let's talk about speaking from your scars. When. Where. How much. To whom. And why it matters.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

THE TESTIMONY AS TOOL, NOT TROPHY

This is the fundamental distinction that determines whether sharing your story is healthy or harmful, helpful or self-serving:

Is your testimony a TOOL you're using to serve others? Or a TROPHY you're displaying to impress them?

TESTIMONY AS TROPHY:

Characteristics:

- Centers on you and your amazing survival
- Emphasizes how impressive your journey has been
- Makes you the hero of the story
- Seeks audience reaction, affirmation, validation
- Used to establish credibility or elevate status
- Shares to be seen, known, admired
- Performances of vulnerability rather than authentic sharing
- Needs the audience's response to feel worthwhile

Language clues:

- "Let me tell you about MY journey..."
- Heavy emphasis on how bad it was and how far you've come
- Dramatic storytelling that centers your experience
- Waiting for applause, affirmation, recognition
- Getting defensive if people don't respond "right"
- Repeating the same story at every opportunity

THE WOUNDED HEALER

What it reveals:

- You're still getting identity from your story
- You're using your scars to meet your need for significance
- Your wounds aren't fully healed into scars yet
- You need validation about your experience
- You're making ministry about you rather than about Jesus

TESTIMONY AS TOOL:

Characteristics:

- Centers on what God has done, not what you've survived
- Shares just enough to create connection and hope
- Makes Jesus the hero, you're just a witness
- Doesn't need audience reaction—offers gift whether received or not
- Used to serve others' growth and healing
- Shares to help, not to be seen
- Authentic vulnerability in service of transformation
- The sharing itself is sufficient; response is bonus

Language clues:

- "I've been where you are..."
- Enough detail to connect, not so much it becomes about you
- Story told in service of a point, not for its own sake
- Comfortable if people don't respond emotionally
- Can share the same story differently based on context and need
- Knows when NOT to share

THE WOUNDED HEALER

What it reveals:

- Your identity is secure apart from your story
- You've healed enough that sharing doesn't re-traumatize you
- Your scars have become integrated—part of you but not all of you
- You don't need validation—you're offering wisdom
- You're making ministry about Jesus working through redeemed humanity

The difference in practice:

Trophy: I'm invited to speak at a recovery event. I spend 45 minutes telling my whole addiction story in vivid detail. People are crying, I'm crying, it's emotionally intense. Afterward, I feel amazing—validated, seen, appreciated. I check to see if it's being recorded for social media. I tell my friends how powerful it was.

Tool: Same event. I spend 10 minutes on my story—enough to establish credibility and connection. Then I spend 35 minutes on practical wisdom about recovery, on pointing to God's grace, on giving them tools they can use. Afterward, several people approach with questions about their own recovery. I feel satisfied that I served them, regardless of whether they affirmed me.

See the difference?

In the first, my story is the star. In the second, my story is the doorway to help them.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

How to know if you're using testimony as trophy:

Ask yourself:

- Do I tell this story at every opportunity, even when it's not relevant?
- Do I need people's emotional response to feel good about sharing?
- Am I hurt or defensive if people don't respond the way I hoped?
- Does telling my story make me feel important or special?
- Do I emphasize the drama of my story over the lessons learned?
- Am I using my story to establish dominance or superiority ("my trauma was worse than yours")?
- Do I feel let down if the story doesn't get the reaction I wanted?

If you answered yes to several of these, you might be using your testimony as trophy.

Brennan Manning writes: "Honesty is such a precious commodity that it is seldom used except in the uttermost crisis."

Authentic testimony is honest, but it's honest in service of others, not in performance for applause. It's vulnerability that invites rather than vulnerability that demands attention.

Your story is a tool in God's hands to help others. It's not a trophy to display your survival.

APPROPRIATE SELF-DISCLOSURE IN MINISTRY

So how do you determine appropriate self-disclosure? How much is too much? How little is too little? What's the balance?

The Golden Rule of Self-Disclosure: Share in service of them, not in service of yourself.

Every time you're considering sharing something personal, ask: **"Will sharing this serve their healing/growth/understanding? Or am I sharing to process my own stuff?"**

THE WOUNDED HEALER

TOO LITTLE SELF-DISCLOSURE:

What it looks like:

- Never sharing anything personal
- Maintaining complete professional distance
- Always being "the expert" who has it all together
- Hiding all struggle, all humanity, all imperfection
- Creating the impression you're invulnerable

Problems:

- Creates distance rather than connection
- Reinforces unhealthy "pastor as superhuman" dynamics
- Prevents people from seeing that faith works in real human lives
- Makes you unapproachable
- Can communicate that struggle is shameful or should be hidden

When this might be appropriate:

- Early in a counseling relationship before trust is established
- With people who might weaponize vulnerability
- In contexts that require professional boundaries (boss/employee, etc.)
- When you genuinely don't have relevant experience to share

TOO MUCH SELF-DISCLOSURE:

What it looks like:

- Sharing every detail of your story
- Making every conversation about you and your experience
- Using people's problems as opportunities to talk about yours
- Sharing without boundaries or discernment
- Overwhelming people with your trauma
- Expecting them to care for you emotionally

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Problems:

- Makes it about you instead of them
- Creates role confusion (who's helping whom?)
- Can re-traumatize them with details they don't need
- Violates professional boundaries
- Uses them to meet your needs
- May indicate you're not healed enough yet to help

When you might fall into this:

- When you're still processing your own trauma
- When you need validation about your experience
- When you're lonely and using ministry for connection
- When your identity is too wrapped up in your story
- When you haven't done enough of your own healing work

APPROPRIATE SELF-DISCLOSURE:

What it looks like:

- Sharing relevant experience that creates connection
- Brief enough to establish credibility, not so detailed it becomes the focus
- Enough to say "I've been there" without needing to prove it
- Matched to their needs and their readiness
- Leaves room for their story to be centered
- Maintains appropriate boundaries

Benefits:

- Creates authentic connection
- Gives hope ("if they survived, maybe I can too")
- Normalizes struggle
- Provides practical wisdom from experience
- Models healthy vulnerability

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Guidelines for appropriate self-disclosure:

- 1. The 80/20 rule:** In any interaction, 80% should be about them and their experience, 20% or less about you and yours.
- 2. The relevance test:** Only share what's directly relevant to their situation. Not the whole story—just the part that connects.
- 3. The timing test:** Share after you've listened deeply and established connection. Not immediately, and not as a way to avoid listening to them.
- 4. The healing test:** Only share wounds that have healed into scars. If telling the story re-traumatizes you, you're not ready to share it in ministry.
- 5. The purpose test:** Can you articulate why you're sharing this? What purpose does it serve for them? If you can't answer that clearly, don't share.
- 6. The boundary test:** Are you sharing while maintaining appropriate professional and emotional boundaries? Or are you creating enmeshment?
- 7. The spotlight test:** After you share, does the focus stay on them and their journey? Or does it shift to you and yours?

Example of appropriate self-disclosure:

Person: "I'm so depressed I can barely get out of bed. And I feel like I'm failing as a Christian because I can't just pray it away."

Inappropriate: "Oh man, let me tell you about MY depression. I was so bad I was suicidal, I had this plan, I almost went through with it, I was hospitalized, I tried all these medications, I had this terrible therapist and then this good therapist, and..." (20 minutes of my story)

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Appropriate: "I understand. I've battled depression too, and I know that crushing weight and the shame that comes with it. The message that you should be able to pray it away is actually really harmful—depression is often a medical condition that needs medical treatment. Have you talked to a doctor about medication or therapy?" (30 seconds of my experience, then focus back on them)

See the difference? Same vulnerability. Completely different execution.

THE "HEALED ENOUGH TO HELP" PRINCIPLE

This is critical: **You can only minister from scars, not from active wounds.**

But how do you know when you're healed enough to help? How do you know when a wound has become a scar?

Signs you're NOT healed enough to share:

Telling the story re-traumatizes you. If sharing triggers flashbacks, panic attacks, emotional flooding—you're not ready. The wound is still open.

You can't tell it without becoming emotionally dysregulated. A few tears? That's okay. Falling apart, unable to continue, needing others to comfort you? Not ready.

You need their validation. If you're sharing because you need them to affirm that what happened was real, was terrible, matters—you're still in healing mode. You're using them as therapist.

You can't separate your identity from the story. If the wound is still how you primarily identify yourself ("I'm a victim of..." "I'm broken because of..." "I'm damaged by..."), it's still a wound.

Sharing serves your needs more than theirs. If you're sharing to process your own stuff, to get attention, to feel important—you're not ready.

You have strong emotional reactions to their response. If you're hurt when they don't react the way you hoped, or if you get defensive if they question anything—the wound is still tender.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

You're still angry/bitter about it. Anger and bitterness indicate unfinished processing. You might be intellectually past it but emotionally still in it.

Signs you ARE healed enough to share:

You can tell the story without being overwhelmed. You might feel emotion, but you're not controlled by it. You can stay present and regulated.

The story is integrated into your larger narrative. It's a chapter, not the whole book. You can see it in context, see how God's been redeeming it.

You don't need their response. You can share as a gift and release it. Whether they receive it well or not doesn't determine your wellbeing.

Your identity is secure apart from the story. You're not "the person this happened to." You're a person with a complex story that includes this experience.

Sharing genuinely serves them. You can honestly say you're sharing to help them, not to help yourself.

You can adapt the telling to their needs. You're not compulsively sharing the same version every time. You can tailor it based on what they need to hear.

You've processed it thoroughly. You've done therapy, spiritual direction, your own grief work. You understand it, have made meaning of it, and integrated it.

The practical test: Can you share your story and then immediately shift focus back to them without needing to process your own feelings about it? If yes, you're probably ready. If no, you need more healing.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

I learned this the hard way. Early in my recovery from burnout, I tried to help other burned-out pastors. But I was still so raw, still so hurt, still so angry at the system that broke me. I ended up either:

1. Making it about me and my pain
2. Getting triggered by their stories and needing to process my own stuff
3. Projecting my experience onto theirs
4. Giving them advice from my wounds rather than wisdom from my scars

My therapist finally said: "You want to help them because you genuinely care. But you're not healed enough yet. You need to keep working on your own recovery before you can guide others through theirs."

That was hard to hear. But she was right.

Now, years later, I can sit with a burned-out minister and hear their story without it triggering my own trauma. I can share relevant parts of my experience without needing to tell the whole thing. I can serve them without using them to process my stuff.

That's the difference between wound and scar. The scar can serve. The wound needs tending.

AVOIDING THE SPOTLIGHT WHILE OFFERING LIGHT

This is a subtle but crucial skill: **How do you share your story in a way that offers light to others without putting yourself in the spotlight?**

Because there's a temptation—especially in a culture that celebrates testimony and values "authenticity"—to use your scars for self-promotion. To build a platform on your pain. To create a brand around your brokenness.

And sometimes that crosses from ministry to performance. From offering light to seeking spotlight.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Seeking spotlight looks like:

- Using your story as your primary ministry platform
- Building your reputation on your trauma
- Constantly referencing your painful past
- Making sure everyone knows your struggle
- Using social media to broadcast your vulnerability
- Creating a persona around "the person who survived X"
- Seeking speaking engagements to tell your story
- Needing recognition for your survival

Offering light looks like:

- Using your story selectively when it serves
- Building your ministry on Jesus, not your testimony
- Referencing your past when relevant, not constantly
- Sharing appropriately in context, not broadcasting
- Being discerning about social media vulnerability
- Being known for serving, not for surviving
- Speaking when invited and when it genuinely helps
- Resting in God's recognition, not needing human applause

The difference is subtle but real.

Example: Two people have survived addiction and are in recovery ministry.

Person A (seeking spotlight):

- Every sermon includes their addiction story
- Social media is full of posts about their recovery journey
- They're constantly in interviews and podcasts about their story
- Their bio leads with "recovering addict"
- They seem to need the recognition and affirmation
- Their identity is wrapped up in their recovery story
- They're building a brand around their brokenness

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Person B (offering light):

- They share their addiction story when it serves the people they're helping
- Social media focuses on recovery resources and hope, not their personal journey
- They speak when invited and when it genuinely helps
- Their bio emphasizes their service, recovery mentioned as relevant
- They serve whether recognized or not
- Their identity is in Christ, recovery is part of their story
- They're building a ministry around helping others

Both are being authentic. Both are using their story. But one is about them, one is about serving others.

Anne Lamott writes: "You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better."

I love this quote because it honors that your story is yours to tell. But I'd add this caution: **Just because you CAN tell your story doesn't mean you SHOULD tell it in every context or that you should make it your identity.**

How to offer light without seeking spotlight:

1. **Check your motivation.** Before sharing, ask: "Am I sharing to help them or to be seen? To serve or to be validated?"
2. **Keep Jesus central.** Your story is powerful, but it's powerful because of what God has done in it. Make sure the focus stays on Him.
3. **Share with discernment.** Not every platform, every audience, every moment calls for your story. Be selective.
4. **Be content with anonymity.** Can you help someone and have them never know your story? Can you serve without being recognized?

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5. Develop yourself beyond your story. Is your story your only ministry content? Or have you developed wisdom, skills, knowledge that go beyond just your personal experience?

6. Notice your reactions. How do you feel when people don't respond to your story? If you're hurt or defensive, you might be too attached to the spotlight.

7. Celebrate others' stories. Make space for other testimonies, other voices, other survivors. Don't monopolize the narrative.

I had to learn this when I started Beloved Rising and my other ministries. It would have been easy to make it all about my story—my burnout, my recovery, my wounds, my scars.

But that's not what people need. They need Jesus. They need practical tools. They need community. They need hope.

My story is the doorway, not the destination. I share enough to establish credibility and connection, then I point them to resources, to God, to their own healing journey.

Your scars can offer light without you needing the spotlight.

PROTECTING OTHERS IN YOUR STORY

This is where it gets ethically complex: **Your story involves other people. And you have to decide how to tell your story while protecting their story.**

The tension: Your story is yours to tell. But your story includes other people who have their own privacy, their own dignity, their own right not to have their story told publicly.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The examples:

- Your childhood trauma involves your parents. Do you have the right to expose their failures publicly?
- Your ministry betrayal involves specific leaders. Can you tell your story without damaging their reputation?
- Your moral failure involves another person. How do you take responsibility without exposing them?
- Your marital problems involve your spouse. Can you share without violating their trust?
- Your family dysfunction involves siblings. Do they consent to their story being told?

There's no simple answer. But here are some guidelines:

WHEN YOU CAN'T PROTECT THEM (AND SHOULDN'T):

When there's abuse. If someone abused you—sexually, physically, emotionally, spiritually—you have the right to tell that truth. You don't owe abusers protection of their reputation. That said, be wise about legal implications and safety.

When there's public wrongdoing. If church leaders engaged in financial misconduct, sexual harassment, spiritual abuse—and it's already public or they're still in positions of power where they could harm others—there may be a moral obligation to speak truth.

When it's necessary for others' safety. If someone is still in ministry/authority and likely to harm others, warning people might be necessary.

When you're taking responsibility for your part. If you're confessing your own moral failure and that inherently involves mentioning someone else's participation, do it with as much discretion as possible while being honest.

WHEN YOU SHOULD PROTECT THEM:

When they've changed. If your parent who wounded you has genuinely repented and changed, maybe tell your healing story without exposing all their failures.

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When telling their story doesn't serve your point. Often you can say "I experienced trauma in childhood" without detailing exactly what your parent did.

When they're vulnerable. If exposing them could genuinely harm them (job loss, relationship damage, etc.) and there's no compelling reason to expose them, protect them.

When you haven't talked to them first. If possible, give people a heads-up that you're going to share something that involves them. Get their perspective.

When they're still alive and in your life. Especially with family, consider whether burning this bridge is worth it.

HOW TO PROTECT WHILE STILL BEING HONEST:

Anonymize. Change identifying details. "A church leader" instead of naming names. "A family member" instead of "my father."

Generalize. "I experienced betrayal in a ministry context" can be enough without detailing exactly who did what.

Focus on your experience, not their behavior. "I felt abandoned" rather than "he abandoned me." Your feelings are inarguable; their actions are debatable.

Take responsibility for your part. If you contributed to the dynamic, own that. Don't make yourself the innocent victim and them the villain.

Be factual, not dramatic. Stick to what actually happened without embellishment or emotional manipulation.

Consider the forum. What you share with your therapist might be different from what you share from a pulpit. Private contexts allow more detail than public ones.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Ask: "What purpose does this detail serve?" If naming them or detailing their specific failures doesn't serve your larger point, leave it out.

My personal approach:

I talk openly about my father wounds. But I don't name my father publicly. I don't detail exactly what he did or didn't do. I keep it general enough to protect his dignity while being honest enough about my experience to help others with similar wounds.

I talk about ministry betrayal. But I don't name churches or leaders. I describe dynamics and patterns without exposing specific people.

I talk about my moral failures and relational damage. But I don't expose others who were involved. I take responsibility for my part without making them collateral damage in my confession.

The principle: Be as honest as necessary to help others and take responsibility, while being as protective as possible of others' dignity and privacy.

There's tension here. It's not always clean. But the question is: Am I telling this story to serve healing, or am I telling it for revenge, attention, or vindication?

If it's the latter, wait. Keep processing. Get more healing. And maybe the story will shift into something that can be told redemptively.

GUIDELINES: WHEN, WHERE, HOW MUCH, AND TO WHOM

Let me give you a practical framework for deciding when and how to share your story:

WHEN TO SHARE:

- ✓ When someone's current struggle matches your healed struggle. "I've been where you are" creates instant connection and hope.

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- ✓ When they explicitly ask about your experience. If they want to know your story, that's permission.
- ✓ When sharing would normalize their experience. Letting them know they're not alone, not crazy, not weak.
- ✓ When you can do it without being triggered or dysregulated. You're healed enough that telling it doesn't wound you again.
- ✓ When it genuinely serves their healing/growth. Not just interesting, but actually helpful.
- ✓ When the timing feels right. After you've listened, established trust, and discerned the right moment.

✗ Don't share when:

- ✗ You need their validation or response
- ✗ You're still actively bleeding from this wound
- ✗ It would violate someone else's privacy inappropriately
- ✗ It's not relevant to their situation
- ✗ You haven't done your own healing work on it yet
- ✗ You're trying to one-up their suffering or prove your credentials
- ✗ They're not in a place to receive it

WHERE TO SHARE:

- ✓ One-on-one counseling/pastoral care - Most appropriate context, can be tailored to individual
- ✓ Small support groups - Safe, confidential setting with people who share similar struggles
- ✓ Relevant teaching contexts - When your experience illustrates a principle that serves the teaching
- ✓ Speaking engagements specifically about your topic - Recovery conferences, pastor health events, etc.
- ✓ Writing/blogging when it serves readers - Documented, can be encountered when people are ready

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✗ Avoid:

✗ Social media oversharing (public, permanent, can be taken out of context) ✗ Casual conversations where it's TMI ✗ From the pulpit every week (becomes performative, makes it about you) ✗ In contexts where you're not safe or where it could be used against you ✗ Settings where people didn't sign up to hear trauma (captive audiences)

HOW MUCH TO SHARE:

The Goldilocks Principle: Not too little, not too much, just right

Too Little:

- "I've struggled too" (no detail, no connection)
- So vague it's meaningless
- Doesn't create credibility

Too Much:

- Every detail, 45-minute soliloquy
- So much it overwhelms or traumatizes them
- Makes it about you instead of them

Just Right:

- "I've battled depression. I know what that darkness feels like and how the shame compounds it. I've been hospitalized, been on medication, done therapy. I'm still here. You will be too. Let me tell you what helped me..."
- Enough to connect and give hope
- Brief enough to stay focused on them

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Formula: Context + Connection + Credential + Pivot

Context: "I've been where you are" **Connection:** Brief, relevant detail that shows you understand

Credential: What qualifies you to speak (survived it, got help, integrated it) **Pivot:** Shift focus back to them and how to help

Example: "I understand what you're going through. I hit rock bottom with my addiction too—lost my job, my family, nearly died. What saved me was getting into a good treatment program and working the 12 steps honestly. Have you looked into treatment options? Let's talk about what might work for you."

30 seconds on my story. Rest of the conversation on theirs.

TO WHOM TO SHARE:

✓ Share with:

People who need hope from your specific experience - Your story matches their wound

Safe people who won't weaponize your vulnerability - Trustworthy, confidential contexts

Those you have appropriate relationship with - Pastoral relationship, counseling relationship, mentoring

People in recovery/support contexts - Everyone's there to be honest about struggle

Those who've earned the right to hear your story - Built trust over time

People you're genuinely trying to help - Your motivation is their wellbeing

✗ Be careful sharing with:

People who might gossip - Your story becomes their drama

Those who are critical or judgmental - Will use it against you

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People you're trying to impress - Wrong motivation

Those in authority over you professionally - Might affect employment/evaluation

People you just met - Oversharing creates weird dynamics

Anyone when you're looking for validation - Using them to process your stuff

WHEN TO SHUT UP AND LISTEN

Sometimes the most powerful thing you can do with your scars is **not share them**.

When NOT to share:

When they need to tell their story, not hear yours. Don't interrupt their processing with your experience.

When your story would minimize theirs. "Oh, I had it worse..." is never helpful.

When you're just trying to bond over shared trauma. Connection is good, but sometimes you need to just listen.

When it would shift focus from them to you. If sharing your story means the next 30 minutes becomes about you, don't.

When you don't have relevant experience. Don't pretend you understand something you don't. "I haven't experienced that, but I'm here to listen" is honest.

When they haven't asked. If they want to know, they'll ask. Don't force your story on them.

When the setting is inappropriate. Public settings, professional contexts, situations where it would be TMI—sometimes silence is wisdom.

The counterintuitive truth: Sometimes having scars means knowing when not to show them.

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Your scars give you credibility. But credibility can also come from knowing when to shut up and listen, when to be present without making it about your experience, when to let their story be enough.

Revelation 12:11 (NASB): "And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony."

Your testimony has power. The word of your testimony—what God has done in and through you—is part of how darkness is overcome.

But notice: It's the blood of the Lamb FIRST. Then the word of testimony.

Jesus is the hero. Your story is the evidence of what Jesus does.

Keep that order. Let your testimony serve His glory. Share your scars in ways that point to the Healer.

And know when your scars should be visible and when they should be silent—because both can minister, when done with wisdom and discernment.

SPEAKING FROM SCARS: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

I've learned to think about sharing my story in layers:

Layer 1: The basic fact - "I've experienced burnout/depression/ministry trauma." Enough to establish that I've been there. Used in casual conversation, brief interactions.

Layer 2: The brief version - 2-3 minute overview. Enough to create connection and credibility. Used in counseling, one-on-one pastoral care, small group settings.

Layer 3: The teaching version - 10-15 minutes. Enough to illustrate principles and offer wisdom. Used in speaking engagements, teaching contexts, when it serves a larger point.

Layer 4: The full version - 30-60 minutes. Deep dive into the whole journey. Reserved for very specific contexts—recovery groups, pastor retreats, therapeutic settings, writing.

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Layer 5: The private version - Details I'll never share publicly. Things I tell only my therapist, my spiritual director, my closest friends. Not everything needs to be public.

Most ministry happens in Layers 1-3. Layer 4 is rare. Layer 5 is sacred.

I've learned to tailor which layer I share based on:

- Who I'm talking to
- What they need
- What the context allows
- What serves them best
- What I'm healed enough to share

And I've learned that **Layer 5 matters**. Having parts of my story that aren't public, that are just mine, that I guard carefully—that protects me from making my scars into my identity.

Because here's the danger: If you share your whole story publicly all the time, it can start to define you. You become "the person who survived X" rather than a complex human whose story includes X.

Keep some of your story sacred. Keep some of it private. Keep some of it for your own healing process, not for public consumption.

Your story is a tool. But it's not the only tool. And you're more than your story.

THE INVITATION TO WISE TESTIMONY

2 Timothy 1:8 (NASB): "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God."

Paul invites Timothy: Don't be ashamed of the testimony. Don't hide what God has done. Share it. Let it serve.

But notice: It's the testimony of the Lord. Not just your personal story, but what the Lord has done in your story.

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That's the invitation:

Tell your story. Don't be ashamed of it. Let your scars be visible when it serves.

But tell it wisely. Discerningly. With appropriate boundaries and protection for all involved.

Tell it as a tool, not a trophy. In service of others, not in service of your ego.

Tell it when you're healed enough to help. When your scars can serve without your wounds bleeding.

Tell it in a way that points to Jesus, not to your survival.

Tell it knowing that your story is powerful, but it's not the whole message.

Tell it and then shut up and listen to theirs.

Your scars matter. Your story matters. Your testimony has power.

But use that power wisely. Steward it carefully. Offer it generously but discerningly.

Because the goal isn't to be known as the person who survived. The goal is to help others survive.

And sometimes that means speaking from your scars. And sometimes it means being silent and letting your scars speak for themselves through presence and service.

Wisdom is knowing the difference.

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Honestly assess: Are you using your testimony as a tool or a trophy? What evidence do you see either way? Think about the last time you shared your story. Did it serve them or serve you? What would you do differently? Where are you on the "healed enough to help" continuum? Are there parts of your story you're sharing before you're ready? What needs more healing before it can be shared? How comfortable are you with the spotlight? Do you seek it? Avoid it? How does that affect how and when you share your story? Who are you protecting in your story? Who should you protect? Are there people you need to have conversations with before sharing more publicly? Practice the Five Layers exercise: What would you share in each layer? What belongs in Layer 5 (private/sacred)? When was the last time you chose NOT to share your story when you could have? What wisdom led to that decision? Read Revelation 12:11 and 2 Timothy 1:8. What do these verses teach you about the power and purpose of testimony? How should that shape how you share yours?

"And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony."
— Revelation 12:11 (NASB)

Your testimony has power.

But the blood of the Lamb comes first.

Your story serves His glory.

Your scars point to the Healer.

Your survival testifies to grace.

Tell your story.

But tell it wisely.

Tell it discerningly.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Tell it in service, not in spotlight.

Tell it as tool, not trophy.

Tell it when you're healed enough to help.

Tell it in a way that protects the vulnerable, points to Jesus, and serves transformation.

And know when to tell it and when to be silent, letting your presence speak louder than your words.

Your scars are credentials.

Use them well.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 15: BUILDING RESILIENCE

"Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning." - Dallas Willard

THE FIREHOUSE FITNESS STANDARD

Every year, without exception, firefighters face what we called "the pack test." Forty-five pounds of gear. Three miles. Forty-five minutes or less. No compromises, no excuses. It didn't matter if you'd rescued ten people the month before or saved a dozen homes last season. Your past performance didn't exempt you from current conditioning.

I remember the first time I failed.

It was year seven. I'd grown comfortable. I knew the job inside and out. I could do it in my sleep—or so I thought. I'd let my personal fitness slide because I was "too busy" actually fighting fires to worry about maintaining my ability to fight fires. The logic seems absurd now, but in the moment, it made perfect sense.

That pack felt like it weighed a hundred pounds. My lungs burned. My legs screamed. At mile two, I knew I wasn't going to make it. The humiliation of walking off that course, of hearing my time called out as a failure, cut deeper than any wound I'd sustained on the job.

But here's what I learned: scars require ongoing care.

Every injury I carried from years of service—the bad knee from a roof collapse, the shoulder that never quite healed right, the lungs compromised by smoke inhalation—all of them needed consistent attention. Ignore them, and they'd take me out faster than any new injury ever could. The old wounds were the ones that needed the most vigilant care.

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The same truth applies to our spiritual and emotional lives.

You can't sustain ministry from scars without ongoing conditioning. You can't maintain wholeness without consistent practices that build resilience. And here's the part that trips up most of us who've been wounded by religion: **building resilience through spiritual disciplines is not returning to the performance trap that wounded us in the first place.**

This is where Dallas Willard's wisdom becomes crucial: "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning."

Spiritual disciplines are not merit badges. They're not penance for past failures or proof of present worthiness. They're the conditioning that keeps us fit for the life Christ has called us to—a life of abundance, not mere survival. They're how we care for our scars while continuing to move forward into wholeness.

DISCIPLINES AS SCAR CARE, NOT SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Let's get something straight right from the start: if your approach to spiritual disciplines leaves you feeling more condemned than connected, more exhausted than energized, more distant from God than drawn to Him, you're doing it wrong. Or more accurately, you've been taught wrong.

The religious system that wounded many of us weaponized spiritual disciplines. Prayer became a performance metric. Bible reading turned into a guilt-inducing checklist. Fasting became a competition. Service became a way to earn approval. We were told these practices would make us "better Christians," as if Jesus needed to be paid back for His grace through our spiritual calisthenics.

No wonder we ran.

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But here's what we need to understand: the abuse of spiritual disciplines doesn't negate their value any more than the abuse of food negates our need to eat. The problem wasn't the practices themselves—the problem was the toxic framework that turned gift into obligation, invitation into demand, joy into drudgery.

Ruth Haley Barton writes, "Solitude is the place where we go in order to hear the truth about ourselves." Notice she doesn't say solitude is where we go to become acceptable. She says it's where we hear truth—and for ragamuffins, that truth is this: **you are already loved, already accepted, already enough.** The disciplines simply create space for us to remember what's already true.

Think about physical therapy after an injury. When you tear a rotator cuff, you don't heal it through sheer willpower or by hating yourself for being hurt. You heal through consistent, appropriate exercises designed specifically for restoration. The exercises don't earn you a healed shoulder—they cooperate with your body's God-given capacity to mend.

Spiritual disciplines work the same way.

They don't earn you God's favor—you already have it. They don't make you worthy of love—you already are. They don't transform you from unacceptable to acceptable—Christ already did that. What they do is create the conditions where healing happens, where truth sinks in, where the abundant life of John 10:10 becomes more than theory.

The Apostle Paul captured this beautifully when he wrote to the Philippians: "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13, NASB).

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Notice the order: God is already at work in you. Your "working out" is participating in what He's already doing, not initiating it, not earning it, not creating it from scratch. You're unwrapping a gift, not building a case for why you deserve one.

This changes everything.

When I pray, I'm not trying to get God's attention—I already have it. When I read Scripture, I'm not checking off a religious obligation—I'm listening to the voice of the One who calls me beloved. When I practice Sabbath, I'm not proving my discipline—I'm receiving rest as resistance against the lies of performance culture.

The disciplines are how we steward our redemption, not how we achieve it.

THE RESILIENCE PROTOCOL: WHAT FIREFIGHTERS KNOW THAT PASTORS FORGET

In the fire service, we had what's called a "personal accountability report"—a system for tracking your condition under extreme stress. Command would radio in: "All units, PAR check." And every firefighter had to report their status: location, air supply, condition of their team.

This wasn't micromanagement. This was survival.

Because here's what we knew that too many ministry leaders forget: **you can't help anyone if you're down.** A firefighter who ignores their own oxygen levels becomes another victim who needs rescue. A pastor who ignores their own soul condition becomes a casualty who creates more casualties.

We need a Personal Resilience Protocol—a way of regularly assessing and maintaining our spiritual, emotional, and physical fitness for the long haul. Not to earn anything, but to sustain what's been given. Not to prove anything, but to protect what matters.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Here are the core elements:

1. HONEST SELF-ASSESSMENT

Mark 6:30-32 gives us a glimpse into Jesus's leadership style that most church culture ignores:

"The apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. And He said to them, 'Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while.' (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.)" (Mark 6:30-31, NASB)

Notice what Jesus does: He asks for a report. Not to critique them, not to grade their performance, but to assess their condition. And when He hears what they've been through, He doesn't say, "Great! Now go do more." He says, "You need rest."

When was the last time you gave yourself an honest assessment without immediately moving into self-condemnation or denial?

Ask yourself:

- What's the condition of my soul right now—honestly?
- Am I running on fumes or operating from fullness?
- What scars am I carrying that need attention?
- Where am I trying to serve from emptiness?
- What warning lights am I ignoring?

This isn't navel-gazing. This is spiritual intelligence. You can't address what you won't acknowledge.

2. RECOGNIZING YOUR TRIGGERS

Every scar has a trigger—something that activates the old wound, sending you back into survival mode even when you're objectively safe. In firefighting, we called them "hot zones"—areas where conditions could rapidly deteriorate. You didn't avoid them, but you sure didn't enter them without awareness and backup.

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For those of us carrying scars from religious trauma, spiritual abuse, or ministry burnout, triggers might include:

- Certain worship songs that were weaponized
- Leadership styles that mirror abusive patterns
- Spiritual language that sounds like manipulation
- Spaces that feel unsafe or inauthentic
- Expectations that echo old performance demands

I'll never forget the first time I tried to attend a Sunday service after my burnout. The worship leader said, "Let's all lift our hands if we really love Jesus." Innocent invitation to most people. To me, in that moment, it sounded like a worthiness test: prove your devotion or be found lacking.

My heart rate spiked. My palms sweated. I wanted to bolt. That was a trigger—an old wound activated by present circumstances.

Resilience doesn't mean triggers disappear. It means you know what they are, you understand why they exist, and you have a plan for navigating them without being controlled by them.

Name your triggers. Honor them as indicators, not indictments. Create strategies for managing them compassionately.

3. BUILDING SUPPORT SYSTEMS THAT LAST

"Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, NASB).

Lone ranger resilience is a myth. You cannot sustain wholeness in isolation. Period.

In the firehouse, we operated on the "two-in, two-out" rule—nobody enters a dangerous situation alone. Your partner isn't there to judge your performance; they're there because survival requires it. They watch your back. They share your load. They tell you when you're about to do something stupid. They drag you out when you go down.

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Orchestrated chapter development while calibrating depth to meet word count targets.

I'm building this chapter well, maintaining Jeff's voice and integrating his firefighter experience with pastoral wisdom. I need to continue developing the support systems section and then move into the rhythm of work and rest, Sabbath practices, and conclude with the practical protocol and reflection questions. I'm at about 1,800 words, so I need to continue with similar depth to reach the 4,500-5,100 word target for a 15-17 page chapter.

The church-wounded often struggle with this because the people who were supposed to be their support system became their source of trauma. Trusting again feels impossible. Building authentic community feels like setting yourself up for more pain.

I get it. I've been there.

But here's the truth: isolation is the thief's playground. Loneliness is where lies thrive and scars fester. You need people—not perfect people, not people who have all the answers, but people who will show up in the mess, tell you the truth in love, and stick around when it gets hard.

Your support system should include:

A Spiritual Friend or Director: Someone further down the road who can help you see what you can't see on your own. Not a guru. Not someone who demands deference. But a wise companion who asks good questions and points you toward truth.

Peers in the Struggle: Other ragamuffins who understand the journey because they're on it too. These are your fellow travelers—the ones who won't be shocked by your doubts, won't shame your questions, and won't leave when the image cracks.

Professional Help When Needed: Therapists, counselors, recovery groups. There's no shame in this. If you broke your leg, you'd see a doctor. When your soul is wounded, professional care isn't weakness—it's wisdom.

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A Community of Belonging: A church, small group, or gathering where you can be known and loved, where your scars don't disqualify you, where grace is more than a concept. These are hard to find, but they exist. Keep looking.

Don't build your support system in crisis. Build it now, in the ordinary days, so when the storms come—and they will—you're not scrambling for safety nets.

4. THE RHYTHM OF WORK AND REST

Jesus modeled this constantly. Read the Gospels with this lens and you'll see it everywhere: intense ministry followed by intentional withdrawal. Teaching the crowds followed by retreating to pray. Healing the sick followed by getting away with His closest friends.

He wasn't being antisocial. He was being sustainable.

"After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone" (Matthew 14:23, NASB).

If Jesus—fully God and fully man—needed this rhythm, what makes us think we can skip it?

Here's what I learned the hard way: **busyness is not a badge of honor. Exhaustion is not evidence of faithfulness. Burnout is not what God requires.**

The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy. One of his favorite tactics is convincing us that relentless productivity equals righteousness, that if we're not running ourselves into the ground, we're not really serving God. It's a lie that's destroyed countless ministers, leaders, parents, and servants.

The rhythm of work and rest isn't about balance in some Pinterest-perfect way. It's about sustainability. It's about recognizing that you're human, not superhuman. It's about stewarding your life, not squandering it.

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Practically, this means:

Daily Rhythms: Build in moments of pause throughout your day. Morning silence before the chaos. Evening reflection after the demands. Breath prayers in the transitions. Jesus often withdrew at dawn and dusk—bookends of intentionality around the day's activity.

Weekly Sabbath: A full day to cease, rest, worship, and delight. Not a day to catch up on chores or ministry prep. A day to remember that the world doesn't depend on your productivity. More on this in a moment.

Seasonal Retreats: Quarterly or annual times of extended withdrawal for deeper rest, reflection, and renewal. This isn't luxury—it's maintenance. Your soul needs more than overnight tune-ups.

Life Seasons: Recognizing that different seasons require different rhythms. The intensity of a church plant differs from the maintenance of established ministry. The demands of young children differ from empty nest years. Don't compare your season to someone else's. Honor where you actually are.

The Psalmist understood this rhythm:

"He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul" (Psalm 23:2-3a, NASB).

Notice: God makes us lie down. Sometimes the rest we need doesn't feel natural because we've been conditioned to equate activity with value. The Good Shepherd knows we need restoration, even when we're too stubborn or too driven to seek it ourselves.

SABBATH AS RESISTANCE TO PERFORMANCE

Let's be honest: for those of us recovering from religious performance culture, Sabbath can feel like just another rule to keep, another way to fail, another item on the spiritual to-do list we're already drowning under.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

"Okay, so now I have to rest perfectly too?"

No.

Sabbath is not a performance. It's a declaration of war against performance.

When God instituted Sabbath in the Ten Commandments, He wasn't adding to your burden—He was freeing you from one. In a world that says your value equals your productivity, Sabbath says, "You are valuable because you exist, not because you produce."

In a culture that demands constant availability, Sabbath says, "I'm off duty, and the world will be fine without me."

In a religious system that judges your worth by your service, Sabbath says, "I'm resting, and God still loves me."

This is revolutionary.

The Hebrew word for Sabbath, *Shabbat*, means to cease, to stop, to rest. It's not about a list of prohibited activities—it's about a posture of trust. When you Sabbath, you're saying: "God's got this. I can let go. My identity isn't tied to my output."

For the church-wounded, this is radical healing.

You mean I can rest without guilt? I can stop without punishment? I can be unproductive without losing my value? Yes. That's exactly what Sabbath teaches.

Mark's Gospel shows us Jesus's approach to Sabbath that infuriated the religious leaders: He healed on it. He let His disciples pluck grain on it. He declared that "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27, NASB).

Sabbath is a gift, not a test. It's provision, not punishment. It's for your benefit, not God's.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

So what does Sabbath look like for ragamuffins?

It looks like permission to stop producing.

Turn off email. Silence your phone. Close your laptop. Whatever your "work" is—paid or unpaid, ministry or marketplace—give yourself permission to set it down for a day. The urgent will wait. The emails can go unanswered. The projects will still be there tomorrow.

It looks like doing what restores you.

For some, that's literal rest—naps, sitting still, doing nothing. For others, it's engaging in life-giving activities that aren't work—hiking, playing music, creating art, lingering over meals with people you love. Sabbath isn't about inactivity; it's about freedom from the tyranny of obligation.

It looks like worship without agenda.

Sabbath is a day to remember who God is and who you are in relation to Him. Not to perform for Him, not to prove anything to Him, but simply to be with Him. To worship because He's worthy, not because you're trying to earn something.

It looks like delight.

The prophet Isaiah calls Sabbath a "delight" (Isaiah 58:13). When was the last time your spiritual life involved actual delight? Sabbath is permission to enjoy yourself, to savor good things, to laugh, to play, to take pleasure in the world God made and the life He's given you.

One of my Sabbath practices is working on furniture in my shop—not for profit, not for obligation, just for the joy of making something beautiful. Some weeks it's music. Some weeks it's being completely still. The point isn't the specific activity; it's the posture: this day is not about performance. This day is about receiving.

Sabbath is the weekly reminder that your worth isn't up for negotiation. You don't earn God's love through your labor, and you won't lose it through your rest.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CREATING YOUR PERSONAL RESILIENCE PROTOCOL

Alright, enough theory. Let's get practical. You need a plan—not a perfect one, not a rigid one, but a sustainable one that fits your actual life, honors your actual scars, and builds actual resilience.

Here's how to create your Personal Resilience Protocol:

STEP 1: BASELINE ASSESSMENT

Before you can build resilience, you need to know where you're starting. Rate yourself honestly (1-10 scale) in these areas:

- **Physical Health:** Sleep, nutrition, movement, medical care
- **Emotional Well-being:** Anxiety levels, depression symptoms, emotional regulation
- **Relational Connection:** Quality of relationships, level of isolation, support system strength
- **Spiritual Vitality:** Sense of God's presence, joy in faith, freedom from religious obligation
- **Vocational Sustainability:** Energy for work/ministry, boundary health, burnout risk

Don't judge the numbers. Just name reality. A low score isn't failure—it's information.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY YOUR NON-NEGOTIABLES

What are the practices you absolutely must maintain to stay healthy? Not what you think you *should* do, not what worked for someone else, but what you actually need.

For me, these non-negotiables include:

- Morning silence before I engage the day
- Weekly Sabbath (mine is Monday)
- Monthly spiritual direction appointment
- Regular therapy sessions
- Daily physical activity
- Connection with my core community

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Your list will be different. The point is to identify the 5-7 practices that, if neglected, lead to your deterioration. These become your resilience foundation.

STEP 3: BUILD SUSTAINABLE RHYTHMS

Now take your non-negotiables and schedule them like you would any important appointment. Block time. Protect boundaries. Treat these commitments with the same seriousness you'd treat a doctor's appointment or a critical work meeting.

Daily Practices (15-30 minutes):

- Morning or evening solitude
- Scripture reading/meditation
- Breath prayers throughout the day
- Evening examination of conscience

Weekly Practices (Half day to full day):

- Sabbath rest
- Worship gathering or spiritual community
- Meaningful connection with friends/family
- Physical activity/recreation

Monthly Practices (2-4 hours):

- Extended prayer/reflection time
- Spiritual direction or mentoring meeting
- Date with spouse or significant friend
- Review of the month and intention-setting for the next

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Quarterly Practices (1-3 days):

- Personal retreat
- Comprehensive life review
- Assessment of goals and values alignment
- Planning for the next season

STEP 4: ESTABLISH YOUR WARNING SYSTEM

What are the signs that you're slipping? Before you hit the wall, there are always indicators. Identify yours.

My warning lights include:

- Irritability with people I love
- Resentment toward ministry responsibilities
- Escape patterns (excessive Netflix, mindless scrolling)
- Physical symptoms (headaches, stomach issues)
- Spiritual dryness that persists beyond normal fluctuation
- Isolation from community

When these lights come on, I have a protocol: call my spiritual director, clear my schedule of non-essentials, double down on Sabbath, reach out to my accountability partners, and if needed, take emergency time away.

Don't wait for catastrophe. Respond to warning signs while you still have capacity.

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STEP 5: SCHEDULE REGULAR PROTOCOL REVIEWS

Your resilience protocol isn't static. What works in one season may not work in another. Build in quarterly reviews where you honestly assess:

- What's working?
- What's not working?
- What needs to change?
- Where am I growing?
- Where am I struggling?

Adjust as needed. This isn't failure to modify your plan—it's wisdom.

THE LONG OBEDIENCE IN THE SAME DIRECTION

Eugene Peterson coined the phrase "a long obedience in the same direction," and it perfectly captures what resilience requires. Not dramatic gestures. Not heroic sprints. But faithful, consistent, ordinary practices maintained over the long haul.

Resilience isn't sexy. It's not Instagram-worthy. It won't make you famous or impressive. It's the daily decision to care for your soul the way you'd care for any valuable thing entrusted to you—with attention, with consistency, with grace.

Remember: "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6, NASB).

God finishes what He starts. Your job isn't to complete yourself—it's to cooperate with what He's already doing. The disciplines are how you cooperate. The resilience protocol is how you sustain that cooperation without burning out.

You're not earning restoration through these practices. You're stewarding it.

You're not proving your worth through consistency. You're protecting what God has already declared valuable.

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You're not working your way into God's favor. You're working out what He's already worked in.

This is grace-fueled effort, not performance-driven striving. And that makes all the difference.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. **Honest Assessment:** On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your current level of spiritual, emotional, and physical resilience? What factors contributed to that score?
2. **Past Conditioning:** What spiritual disciplines or practices have been weaponized in your past? How has that abuse affected your willingness to engage in healthy spiritual rhythms now?
3. **Trigger Awareness:** What specific situations, environments, or spiritual language trigger old wounds for you? How might naming these triggers help you navigate them more compassionately?
4. **Support System Inventory:** Who currently makes up your support system? Where are the gaps? What specific steps could you take this month to strengthen your relational safety net?
5. **Work/Rest Rhythm:** Describe your current rhythm of work and rest. Is it sustainable? What would need to change for you to move toward greater health?
6. **Sabbath Resistance:** What internal or external obstacles make Sabbath difficult for you? What would it mean for you to practice Sabbath as resistance to performance culture?
7. **Non-Negotiables:** What are the 5-7 practices that you absolutely must maintain to stay healthy? Are these currently protected in your schedule, or are they constantly compromised?
8. **Warning Lights:** What are the early warning signs that you're heading toward burnout or breakdown? When was the last time you experienced these, and how did you respond?
9. **Protocol Creation:** Using the steps outlined in this chapter, draft your own Personal Resilience Protocol. What daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly practices will form your foundation?
10. **Grace vs. Earning:** How does Dallas Willard's statement "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning" challenge or reshape your understanding of spiritual disciplines? Where might you still be trying to earn rather than steward?

A Closing Word:

Building resilience is an act of faith. It's declaring that you believe God when He says your life matters, your wholeness matters, your sustainability matters. It's refusing to let the thief's narrative of destruction have the last word.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Your scars do require ongoing care. But you're not alone in that care. The Good Shepherd is committed to your restoration—not just your initial redemption, but your sustained wholeness. He makes you lie down in green pastures. He leads you beside still waters. He restores your soul.

And He invites you to cooperate with that restoration through practices that honor both your humanity and your belovedness.

This is not one more thing you have to do to be acceptable. This is how you live from the acceptance you already have.

There's a difference.

And for ragamuffins, that difference is everything.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 16: WHEN SCARS TEAR OPEN

"The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing... not healing, not curing... that is a friend who cares." - Henri Nouwen

THE REALITY OF RE-INJURY

Year twelve on the job, I thought I was invincible.

I'd survived structure fires, wildland fires, vehicle extractions, hazmat calls, medical emergencies that would haunt most people's nightmares. My shoulder injury from a roof collapse three years prior had healed—or so I believed. I'd done the physical therapy, passed the fitness tests, returned to full duty. The scar tissue was there, sure, but I'd learned to work around it.

Until the day I didn't.

It was a routine call. Well, as routine as pulling an unconscious victim from a smoke-filled bedroom can be. I hoisted him over my shoulder in a fireman's carry, the way I'd done hundreds of times. But this time, something gave. Not broke—worse. The old injury site tore open internally, and the pain dropped me to my knees.

I'd re-injured what I thought was healed.

Here's what made it worse than the original injury: the psychological impact. The first time I got hurt, it was part of the job—occupational hazard, badge of honor, story to tell. But the second time? That felt like failure. Like I hadn't healed properly. Like maybe I wasn't as recovered as I thought. Like perhaps I'd never be fully whole again.

The doubt was worse than the pain.

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What I didn't understand then—but learned through multiple re-injuries over the years—is that **scars are permanent sites of vulnerability**. They don't disappear. They don't return you to pre-injury status. They're places where your body remembers trauma, where tissue that was once torn can tear again under sufficient stress, where healing is real but fragility remains.

This is true for physical wounds.

It's equally true for emotional, psychological, and spiritual wounds.

If you're reading this chapter, chances are you know exactly what I'm talking about. You thought you'd healed from the spiritual abuse, the ministry burnout, the church trauma, the relational wounds. You did the work—therapy, recovery groups, time away, rebuilding trust. You experienced genuine restoration. You felt stronger, healthier, more whole.

And then something happened.

A worship song triggered you back to the toxic church. A leadership decision mirrored the abuse pattern. A conflict re-activated old trauma responses. Someone used spiritual language that sounded exactly like the manipulation you'd escaped. A season of stress exposed vulnerabilities you thought you'd overcome.

And suddenly, you're not just hurting—you're devastated. Because this wasn't supposed to happen anymore. You'd healed. You'd moved on. You'd done everything right.

The scar tore open, and now you're questioning everything.

Let me tell you something with the authority of someone who's lived this: **A scar tearing open is not the same as never having healed in the first place**. Re-injury is not evidence that your restoration was fake. A setback is not proof that you're back at the beginning.

You're not starting over. You're navigating a complication in an ongoing healing journey.

There's a difference. And understanding that difference might be what keeps you from giving up entirely.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

UNDERSTANDING TRIGGERS AND TRAUMA RESPONSES

Let's talk about what's actually happening when a scar tears open, because knowledge is power, and understanding your own nervous system can help you navigate crisis with less self-condemnation.

When you experience trauma—whether a single catastrophic event or cumulative exposure to harmful situations—your brain encodes that experience as danger. It creates neural pathways designed to protect you: if you encounter similar circumstances again, your nervous system can respond instantly without waiting for conscious thought.

This is why soldiers dive for cover at the sound of fireworks. Why abuse survivors flinch at raised voices. Why those wounded by church can have panic attacks in a worship service.

Your brain isn't malfunctioning. It's doing exactly what it was designed to do: keeping you alive by remembering danger.

The problem is that your nervous system can't always distinguish between actual present danger and circumstances that merely resemble past danger. A trigger is anything—a sound, a smell, a phrase, a situation, an anniversary date—that activates your trauma response as if the original threat were happening right now.

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, in his groundbreaking work on trauma, explains it this way: "The body keeps the score." Your rational mind might know you're safe now, but your body remembers otherwise. When triggered, you're not being dramatic or weak or faithless—you're experiencing an involuntary neurological response.

The Apostle Paul understood this internal conflict long before neuroscience could explain it:

"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want" (Romans 7:18-19, NASB).

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Paul's talking about sin patterns, but the principle applies to trauma responses too: there's a gap between what you know is true and what your body/emotions are doing in the moment. You want to feel safe, but your body is screaming danger. You want to trust again, but your nervous system is locked in defensive mode. You want to worship freely, but your trauma response is hitting the panic button.

This doesn't make you defective. It makes you human.

Common trauma responses include:

Fight: Anger, aggression, confrontation, defending yourself even when not under attack. In ministry contexts, this might look like overreacting to criticism, immediately assuming bad intent, or becoming combative when challenged.

Flight: Escaping, withdrawing, isolating, running from anything that feels threatening. This might look like ghosting your community, quitting ministry abruptly, or avoiding church altogether.

Freeze: Shutting down emotionally, going numb, dissociating, feeling paralyzed. This might look like inability to make decisions, emotional flatness, or feeling like you're watching your life from outside your body.

Fawn: People-pleasing, over-accommodating, suppressing your own needs to keep peace. This might look like saying yes when you mean no, minimizing your pain to make others comfortable, or returning to toxic situations because confrontation feels impossible.

None of these responses are chosen. They're survival mechanisms—and they served you well at one time. The problem is when they activate in situations that don't actually require survival mode.

The Psalmist captures this internal chaos beautifully:

"As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" (Psalm 42:1-3, NASB).

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Notice what's happening here: Longing for God and feeling abandoned by God coexist. Spiritual thirst and spiritual despair are both present. This isn't contradiction—it's the honest complexity of trauma.

A few verses later, the same Psalmist writes:

"Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence" (Psalm 42:5, NASB).

He's literally talking to himself, reminding his soul of what his emotions don't currently feel. This is someone managing a trauma response in real-time—acknowledging the despair while reaching for hope, not denying the darkness while refusing to let it have the final word.

When your scar tears open and you're triggered back into trauma responses, you're not losing your mind. You're not backsliding. You're not proving everyone right who said you'd never really heal.

You're having a human response to real pain, and you need a plan for what to do next.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SETBACK AND FAILURE

This distinction might save your life—or at least your calling.

A **setback** is a temporary disruption in forward progress. It's painful, it's frustrating, it might require recalibration, but it doesn't negate the ground you've already gained.

A **failure** is a complete collapse, a total undoing, a return to the starting point with nothing learned and nothing salvaged.

When a scar tears open, you're experiencing a setback, not a failure. Even when it feels catastrophic. Even when you're questioning everything. Even when the pain is as bad as—or worse than—the original injury.

Here's why this matters: how you interpret your crisis determines how you respond to it.

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If you see this as failure, you'll spiral into shame, self-condemnation, and likely self-destruction. You'll tell yourself you're irredeemable, you'll question whether restoration was ever real, you'll consider giving up entirely. The internal narrative becomes: "See? I knew I couldn't be fixed. I'm fundamentally broken. Why even try?"

But if you see this as a setback, you can grieve the pain while maintaining perspective. You can acknowledge the difficulty while remembering the progress. You can be honest about the present struggle without erasing past victories. The internal narrative becomes: "This is hard and it hurts, but it doesn't erase everything I've learned. I've survived before; I can survive again. I need help, and that's okay."

Same circumstances. Completely different trajectories.

Look at Peter's story. After declaring he'd never deny Jesus, he did exactly that—three times, with increasing vehemence, culminating in cursing and swearing he didn't know Him (Matthew 26:69-75). This wasn't just disappointing Jesus; this was complete betrayal of the person he loved most.

Peter could have interpreted this as total failure: "I'm not disciple material. Jesus was wrong about me. I should go back to fishing and forget this ever happened."

Instead—after the resurrection—Jesus sought him out. Three times Jesus asked, "Do you love me?" (John 21:15-17), giving Peter the chance to reaffirm his devotion once for each denial. Jesus didn't pretend the betrayal hadn't happened, but He also didn't treat it as disqualifying failure. He treated it as a setback in Peter's formation.

And Peter went on to become a foundational leader in the early church.

The writer of Lamentations—writing from the utter devastation of Jerusalem's destruction—models this distinction powerfully:

"This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:21-23, NASB).

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Pay attention to what he does: "**This I recall to my mind.**" He's not denying the devastation—the entire book of Lamentations is raw grief and honest despair. But in the middle of catastrophe, he makes a deliberate choice to remember what remains true even when his circumstances scream otherwise.

God's mercies are new every morning.

Not because yesterday didn't happen. Not because the pain isn't real. But because **God's character doesn't change based on your setbacks.**

When your scar tears open, you get to choose how you interpret it. You can catastrophize it as proof of permanent brokenness, or you can recognize it as a painful but navigable complication in an ongoing healing journey.

I'm not minimizing the pain. Re-injury hurts—sometimes worse than the original wound. But pain intensity doesn't determine your future trajectory. You do, by the narrative you choose to believe about what's happening.

HAVING A CRISIS PLAN (BEFORE THE CRISIS)

In the fire service, we didn't wait until we were trapped in a burning building to figure out our "Mayday" protocol. We trained for worst-case scenarios constantly, drilling the procedures until they became muscle memory. Because in crisis, you don't rise to the occasion—you default to your training.

The same principle applies to emotional and spiritual crisis.

If you wait until your scar tears open to figure out what to do, you'll be making critical decisions from your least resourced state. Your prefrontal cortex—the part of your brain responsible for rational thought—goes offline during trauma activation. You'll be operating from your amygdala, which is excellent at keeping you alive but terrible at making wise choices.

You need a crisis plan now, while you still have capacity to think clearly.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Here's what that looks like:

1. IDENTIFY YOUR CRISIS CONTACTS

Who are the 3-5 people you can call when you're in crisis? Not people who will fix you, not people who will have all the answers, but people who will show up, listen, tell you the truth, and help you not make catastrophic decisions while you're in pain.

Write their names and numbers down. Put them in your phone. Give them permission now to speak into your life when you're not thinking straight.

Henri Nouwen's words are crucial here: "The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing... not healing, not curing... that is a friend who cares."

You don't need people who will immediately try to fix or rescue you. You need people who will sit with you in the mess and refuse to let you self-destruct.

2. ESTABLISH YOUR NON-NEGOTIABLES

What are the things you absolutely will not do, no matter how bad it gets? This isn't about willpower; it's about creating guardrails before you need them.

Examples might include:

- I will not make major decisions (quitting, moving, severing relationships) within the first 72 hours of crisis
- I will not isolate completely—I will reach out to at least one person
- I will not harm myself or others
- I will not abandon my recovery commitments (therapy, groups, medication if applicable)
- I will not return to destructive coping mechanisms that I know don't work

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Write these down. Share them with your crisis contacts. When you're in the middle of chaos, you won't remember—but they will, and they can help you honor these commitments even when you don't want to.

3. CREATE YOUR STABILITY TOOLKIT

What are the things that help ground you when you're triggered? Not what you *think* should help, but what actually, practically works for you.

Your toolkit might include:

- Specific Scriptures that anchor you (more on this shortly)
- Breathing exercises or grounding techniques
- Music that calms or comforts you
- Physical activities that help regulate your nervous system
- Sensory tools (cold water on your face, weighted blanket, etc.)
- Prayers you can say when you can't form your own words

Have this toolkit ready before you need it. In crisis, you won't have the bandwidth to create it from scratch.

4. KNOW YOUR PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT OPTIONS

Have your therapist's emergency contact information. Know the crisis hotlines for your area. Understand your insurance's mental health coverage. If you take medication, know the protocol for reaching your prescriber after hours.

This isn't being dramatic or pessimistic—it's being responsible. You have smoke detectors in your house not because you expect a fire, but because you know one could happen. Same principle.

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5. DOCUMENT YOUR TRUTH

When you're healthy enough to think clearly, write yourself a letter. Remind yourself of what's true, what you've learned, what God has done, who He says you are. Include specific examples of healing you've experienced, victories you've won, progress you've made.

Seal it. Keep it accessible.

When your scar tears open and the lies scream that you'll never be whole, read that letter. Let your healthy self speak to your wounded self.

David did this constantly in the Psalms—reminding himself of God's past faithfulness when his present circumstances felt overwhelming:

"I will remember the deeds of the Lord; surely I will remember Your wonders of old. I will meditate on all Your work and muse on Your deeds" (Psalm 77:11-12, NASB).

This isn't denial. It's choosing to remember comprehensively—not just the pain, but also the proof of God's presence through previous pain.

KNOWING WHEN TO STEP BACK FROM MINISTRY

This is the hardest part for people like us.

We're the ones who show up. We're the ones others depend on. We're the ones who've been called, commissioned, committed. Stepping back feels like failure, like abandonment, like proving the critics right who said we were never stable enough for ministry in the first place.

But here's the truth you need to hear: **Sometimes the most faithful thing you can do is stop.**

THE WOUNDED HEALER

When a scar tears open and you're in acute crisis, continuing to minister from that place doesn't serve anyone. It doesn't serve the people you're trying to help—they deserve someone who's resourced enough to hold space for them. It doesn't serve you—it compounds your injury. And it doesn't serve the kingdom—burnout and breakdown create casualties, not disciples.

There are seasons where stepping back isn't weakness; it's wisdom.

Jesus modeled this. In Mark 1, after a night of healing crowds and casting out demons, everyone's looking for Him. The disciples find Him praying and say, essentially, "What are you doing? Everyone needs you!"

Jesus's response? "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for" (Mark 1:38, NASB).

He didn't let their need dictate His calling. He didn't let their urgency override His clarity. He knew when to engage and when to move on.

Later, in John 7, His brothers pressure Him to go public at a feast. His response: "My time has not yet come" (John 7:6, NASB). There's a right time and a wrong time, and wisdom knows the difference.

When your scar tears open, you need to honestly assess: Can I continue in my current ministry commitments without causing further damage to myself or others? Or do I need to step back temporarily—or perhaps permanently—to prioritize my healing?

Signs it might be time to step back:

Physical Symptoms: Persistent insomnia, panic attacks, constant illness, physical collapse. Your body is trying to tell you something. Listen.

Emotional Depletion: You have nothing left to give. You're ministering from empty, and it's showing in irritability, resentment, or emotional numbness.

Moral Injury: You're being asked to participate in or endorse things that violate your conscience, and the cost of staying is destroying your integrity.

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Relational Breakdown: Your marriage, your kids, your closest relationships are suffering because of your ministry commitments.

Loss of Calling Clarity: You can't remember why you started this. The fire's gone out. You're going through motions that feel increasingly hollow.

Trauma Re-activation: The ministry environment itself is triggering your trauma responses, and you can't separate the legitimate calling from the toxic system.

Stepping back might mean:

- Taking a sabbatical (more on this in a moment)
- Reducing your responsibilities temporarily
- Transitioning to a different role
- Leaving a specific ministry context entirely
- Taking time completely away from formal ministry to heal

This isn't abandoning your calling. It's protecting it. You can't serve faithfully from a place of unaddressed crisis. And honestly? God doesn't need your breakdown. He invites your wholeness.

The work will still be there. But if you keep going until you completely collapse, you might not be.

THE WISDOM OF SEASONAL SABBATICALS

Let's differentiate between two types of stepping back: crisis intervention and wisdom intervention.

Crisis intervention is what happens when you've already torn open—you step back because you have to, because you're actively breaking down, because continuing would cause serious harm.

Wisdom intervention is stepping back before you reach crisis—proactive sabbatical that honors the reality of human limitation and creates space for deep renewal.

Both are valid. Both are necessary at different times. But honestly? Wisdom intervention is better.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The biblical concept of Sabbath isn't just a weekly practice—it's a principle that scales. Every seventh day, rest. Every seventh year, let the land lie fallow (Leviticus 25:4). There's a built-in recognition that productivity cannot be sustained indefinitely without seasons of intentional rest.

Yet modern ministry culture—especially in church-planting, missions, and entrepreneurial ministry—treats sabbaticals as luxuries or rewards for long tenure, not as necessary rhythms for sustainability.

This is killing us.

A sabbatical is not a vacation. Vacation is for recreation. Sabbatical is for re-creation—time set apart to rest deeply, hear God freshly, process what you've experienced, and prepare for what's next.

Extended sabbaticals (2-3 months every 5-7 years) allow you to:

- Get enough distance from ministry to actually see it clearly
- Address accumulated fatigue that weekly rest can't touch
- Pursue extended therapy or recovery work
- Reconnect with family without divided attention
- Explore new learning without immediate application pressure
- Worship as a participant instead of a leader
- Remember who you are apart from what you do

I took my first sabbatical after fifteen years in vocational ministry, and it saved my life—literally. I didn't realize how close to complete breakdown I was until I stopped long enough to feel it. The first month, I mostly slept. The second month, I cried more than I had in years. The third month, I started to remember what joy felt like.

By the time I returned, I wasn't just rested—I was renewed. And I returned with clarity about what needed to change for my ministry to be sustainable.

If you're reading this and thinking, "I could never take that much time off," I understand. I felt the same way. But ask yourself: Is it better to take intentional time now, or to be forced out by crisis later?

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Some denominations and ministry organizations build sabbatical into their structure. If yours does, use it—not as a luxury, but as the essential rhythm it is. If yours doesn't, advocate for it. And if you're leading your own ministry, give yourself permission to build this in proactively.

Seasonal sabbaticals aren't optional for long-term sustainability. They're essential.

SCRIPTURE AS ANCHOR IN THE STORM

When your scar tears open and you're triggered into crisis, you likely won't have the capacity for deep theological reflection or extensive Bible study. What you need are anchor verses—truths you've planted deep that can hold you steady when your emotions and thoughts are chaotic.

These are mine. Maybe they'll become yours:

Lamentations 3:21-23 (NASB): "This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness."

When I'm convinced I've used up all of God's patience with me, when I feel like I've gone back to Him with the same wound too many times, this reminds me: His mercies don't run out. Every morning—including this one—they're fresh. Not because I've earned them, but because He's faithful.

Psalm 42:11 (NASB): "Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God."

This is my permission to acknowledge despair without staying there. To name the disturbance without letting it define me. To reach for hope even when I don't feel it yet.

Romans 8:38-39 (NASB): "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

When my scar tears open and I'm flooded with shame, convinced I've finally crossed the line where God gives up on me, this is my anchor: Nothing—including my worst moments, my biggest failures, my most painful relapses—can separate me from His love. Nothing.

Isaiah 43:2-3a (NASB): "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

Notice: He doesn't promise I won't go through waters or walk through fire. He promises He'll be with me in them, and they won't destroy me. This has been my firefighter's verse—the promise that even in the worst conditions, I'm not alone, and I won't be consumed.

2 Corinthians 4:8-9 (NASB): "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

Paul's giving me vocabulary for the middle place—the place between "I'm fine" and "I'm finished." When I'm afflicted but not crushed, when I'm struck down but not destroyed, I'm allowed to name both the struggle and the survival.

Write your anchor verses down. Memorize them. Put them on your phone's lock screen. Tape them to your bathroom mirror. Give them to your crisis contacts. These are the truths that will steady you when everything else is shaking.

EMERGENCY PROTOCOL: STEPS FOR WHEN YOU'RE IN CRISIS

Alright. Let's get brutally practical. Here's your step-by-step protocol for when a scar tears open and you're in acute crisis:

IMMEDIATE (First 0-24 Hours):

1. Safety First If you're having thoughts of self-harm or suicide, call 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) immediately. This isn't weakness. This is wisdom. If you're in danger of harming yourself or others, professional intervention is essential.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

2. Reach Out Call or text one of your crisis contacts. Don't wait. Don't minimize. Don't convince yourself you're bothering them. Say: "My scar tore open. I'm in crisis. I need you to help me not make bad decisions right now."

3. Stop Making Decisions Implement your 72-hour moratorium on major decisions. Don't quit anything. Don't move. Don't send that email. Don't burn any bridges. Give yourself space between impulse and action.

4. Ground Yourself Physically Use your stability toolkit. Breathe: 4 seconds in, 4 seconds hold, 4 seconds out, 4 seconds hold. Repeat. Engage your senses: cold water on your face, feet on the ground, something textured to hold. Get your nervous system out of fight-or-flight if possible.

5. Return to Your Anchor Read your anchor verses. Read your letter to yourself. Remind yourself of what's true, even when you can't feel it. You're not starting over. This is a setback, not failure.

SHORT-TERM (24-72 Hours):

6. Clear Your Schedule Cancel non-essential commitments. You're not being flaky; you're in crisis management. Give yourself permission to say no to everything that isn't absolutely necessary.

7. Increase Support Schedule an emergency session with your therapist. If you don't have one, find crisis counseling resources. Call your pastor, spiritual director, or trusted mentor. Double down on connection.

8. Assess Your Ministry Capacity With input from trusted others (not just your own judgment), honestly evaluate whether you can continue current ministry commitments without causing further damage. Be willing to step back if needed.

9. Attend to Basics Sleep, eat, move your body, take medication if prescribed. Your brain cannot process trauma when your physical needs are unmet. This isn't optional.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

MEDIUM-TERM (1-2 Weeks):

10. Process What Triggered You With professional or pastoral support, identify what specifically activated this crisis. What scar got torn? What circumstances created the conditions? Understanding isn't about blame—it's about awareness for next time.

11. Revisit Your Resilience Protocol Your Personal Resilience Protocol (from Chapter 15) needs revision based on what you've learned. What warning signs did you miss? What supports need strengthening? What changes need to happen?

12. Communicate Appropriately If your crisis impacts others (ministry team, family, community), communicate what's happening to the degree that's appropriate. You don't owe anyone your full story, but those affected deserve honesty about your capacity.

13. Plan Your Re-Entry Don't rush back into full capacity. Create a gradual re-entry plan with built-in checkpoints. Start with 50% capacity, assess, increase slowly. Marathon, not sprint.

LONG-TERM (Ongoing):

14. Deep Work on the Underlying Issue Crisis moments often reveal deeper work that needs attention. Don't just manage the symptom; address the root. This might mean extended therapy, trauma processing (EMDR, somatic work), recovery programs, or significant life changes.

15. Rebuild Trust—Carefully If ministry or relationships feel unsafe after this crisis, don't force yourself back into them prematurely. Trust is rebuilt slowly, with evidence. It's okay to need time and boundaries.

16. Document What You Learned Write down what this crisis taught you. What helped? What didn't? What do you need to remember for next time? Future you will need this wisdom.

WHEN PROFESSIONAL HELP ISN'T OPTIONAL

There are times when pastoral care, friendship, and spiritual community aren't enough. When a scar tears open and the crisis is severe, professional intervention isn't a nice-to-have—it's essential.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

You need professional help if:

- You're having persistent thoughts of suicide or self-harm
- You're experiencing dissociation or psychotic symptoms
- You're engaging in dangerous or self-destructive behaviors
- Your functioning has completely broken down (can't work, can't care for yourself, can't maintain basic responsibilities)
- You're experiencing severe depression or anxiety that persists despite support
- You're using substances to cope in ways that are escalating
- Your trauma symptoms are getting worse instead of better

There's no shame in this. Would you feel ashamed for seeing a cardiologist if you had a heart attack? Your brain and your nervous system are organs too. They can get sick. They can need medical intervention.

Finding the right professional help might include:

Trauma-informed therapist: Look for EMDR, somatic experiencing, or internal family systems practitioners if you're dealing with complex trauma.

Psychiatric care: If medication might help stabilize you enough to do deeper work, don't let stigma prevent you from exploring this option.

Intensive outpatient programs: For severe cases where you need more support than weekly therapy but don't require hospitalization.

Residential treatment: If your crisis is severe enough that you need 24/7 support for a period.

Your insurance likely covers mental health services. If cost is a barrier, many therapists offer sliding scale fees, and community mental health centers provide services regardless of ability to pay.

Getting professional help isn't giving up on faith. It's stewarding the life God gave you by using the resources He's provided.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

THE GIFT OF HONEST LAMENT

One of the most healing gifts in Scripture is permission to lament—to bring your unedited pain to God without pretense, without sanitizing, without forcing premature praise.

Psalm 42 and Lamentations 3 both model this beautifully. They don't bypass the pain to get to hope faster. They sit in the agony long enough to honor it, then reach for truth without denying reality.

When your scar tears open, you don't need toxic positivity. You don't need people telling you to "just have more faith" or "look on the bright side." You need permission to say to God—and to trusted others—exactly how bad it is.

"Why have You forgotten me?" (Psalm 42:9, NASB)

"He has made me desolate" (Lamentations 1:13, NASB)

"He has filled me with bitterness" (Lamentations 3:15, NASB)

This is Scripture. This is how God's people have always processed trauma—by bringing the full truth of it into God's presence and refusing to lie about how much it hurts.

Honest lament is an act of faith, not a failure of it.

It says: I believe You're real enough to handle my rage. I trust You're strong enough to hold my despair. I know You're loving enough not to condemn me for my honesty.

Give yourself permission to lament. Journal the unedited version. Scream in your car. Cry until you're empty. Sit in silence because you don't have words. Tell God you're angry, confused, betrayed, terrified.

He can handle it. He'd rather have your honest rage than your pretend praise.

And here's what lament does: it creates space for hope to return authentically, not prematurely. The Psalmist doesn't force hope. He returns to it after giving the despair its full due:

THE WOUNDED HEALER

"Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him" (Psalm 42:11, NASB).

Yet. Not now, but yet. Future hope is real hope even when present hope is absent.

When your scar tears open, lament honestly, reach for hope persistently, and trust that both can be true at once.

A WORD TO THOSE WHO LOVE SOMEONE IN CRISIS

If you're reading this chapter not because you're in crisis but because someone you love is, here's what they need from you:

Presence, not solutions. Henri Nouwen was right: "The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing... not healing, not curing... that is a friend who cares."

Belief, not doubt. When they tell you how bad it is, believe them. Don't minimize. Don't compare. Don't tell them others have it worse. Their pain is real, and it deserves to be honored.

Patience, not pressure. Healing isn't linear. They might be better today and worse tomorrow. Don't make them perform recovery on your timeline.

Boundaries, not enabling. Love them enough to help them honor their non-negotiables, even when they're fighting you. Don't let your discomfort with their pain enable their self-destruction.

Prayer, not platitudes. Pray for them, with them, around them. But don't use prayer as a way to avoid the messy, uncomfortable work of just being present.

Your consistency might be what keeps them alive. Your willingness to stay when it's hard might be the proof they need that they're not irredeemable.

Thank you for loving well. It matters more than you know.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. **Identifying Your Scars:** What are the old wounds you carry that remain sites of vulnerability? What specific situations, environments, or interactions tend to trigger these scars?
2. **Trauma Response Pattern:** When you're triggered, what's your default trauma response? (Fight, flight, freeze, or fawn?) How has this response served you in the past? How might it be harming you now?
3. **Setback vs. Failure:** Have you interpreted past struggles as failures rather than setbacks? How might reframing them change your sense of hope for recovery?
4. **Crisis Plan Assessment:** Do you currently have a crisis plan in place? If not, who would you include in your crisis contacts? What would your non-negotiables be?
5. **Ministry Capacity:** Are you currently trying to minister from a place of crisis or near-crisis? What would stepping back look like for you—and what fear makes that feel impossible?
6. **Sabbatical Need:** When was the last time you took extended time away from ministry for deep renewal? If you've never taken a sabbatical, what's preventing you?
7. **Anchor Verses:** What Scripture passages help ground you in crisis? If you don't have any memorized, which verses from this chapter might become anchors for you?
8. **Professional Help:** Is there a mental health issue you've been avoiding professional help for? What would need to happen for you to pursue that care?
9. **Lament Practice:** How comfortable are you with bringing unedited pain to God? Have you given yourself permission to lament honestly, or do you feel pressure to maintain spiritual positivity?
10. **Support Network:** Who are the people in your life who can "be silent with you in a moment of despair"? If that list is short or empty, what's one step you could take this week toward building that kind of community?

A Closing Word:

When your scar tears open, you're not back at the beginning. You're in a painful moment within an ongoing story of restoration. The plot hasn't changed—the thief still comes to steal, kill, and destroy, but Jesus still came that you might have life, and have it abundantly.

That promise doesn't expire when you struggle. It doesn't get revoked when you hurt. It doesn't disappear when you need help.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

His mercies are new every morning—including this one, even when it's the hardest morning you've had in a long time.

You're going to survive this. Maybe not unchanged—scars do that, they mark us—but you'll survive. And on the other side of this crisis, you'll have more wisdom, more compassion, more authenticity, and maybe more clarity about what needs to change for your life to be sustainable.

The scar tore open. But scars, even torn ones, can heal again.

And you're still loved, still chosen, still called, still being made whole.

Nothing—not even this—can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Hold on to that when you can't hold on to anything else.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CONCLUSION: The Beautiful Scars

I'm sitting in my workshop, surrounded by pieces of furniture in various stages of restoration. A Victorian chair with broken legs, waiting for repair. A mid-century dresser stripped down to bare wood, ready for refinishing. An antique table with water damage and years of neglect.

And over by the window, finished and gleaming, a walnut sideboard that came to me six months ago as literal trash. Someone had put it on the curb. Broken hardware. Gouged surface. One door hanging by a hinge. A hundred years of abuse and neglect.

Now? It's beautiful. The walnut grain glows. The damage has been repaired. The hardware restored. The finish protects and enhances. You can still see evidence of its history if you look closely—the patina, the slight variations in the wood, the character marks that come from a century of use. But those marks don't detract from its beauty. They add to it.

This piece has a story. And the story includes both the damage and the restoration. Both the breaking and the repair. Both the abandonment and the redemption.

The scars are part of its beauty now, not its shame.

I run my hand across the smooth surface and think about the journey we've taken together through this book. From recognizing our wounds to sitting in the ash heap. From receiving grace to integrating our stories. From understanding the Crucified Christ to learning to speak from our scars. From building resilience to sustaining wholeness.

From wound to scar. From tragedy to testimony. From bleeding to bearing witness.

And I realize: We're not that different from this sideboard. We came into God's hands broken, damaged, scarred by years of use and abuse and neglect. And He didn't throw us away. He didn't declare us trash. He didn't sand us down until there was no evidence of our history.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

He restored us. Repaired us. Refinished us. And in the process, our scars became part of our beauty.

That's the message of this book. That's the hope for wounded healers everywhere. That's the truth that changes everything about how we understand ministry, suffering, and redemption.

Your scars are not your disqualification. They're your credentials. They're part of your glory, not your shame.

Let me show you why I believe that.

THE GLORIFIED BODY

We started this book with an image, and we'll end with the same one: The resurrected Christ, standing in glory, bearing His scars.

"And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain" (Revelation 5:6, NASB).

Not a Lamb that *was* slain—past tense, over and done. A Lamb standing "as if slain"—present continuous, bearing the marks of crucifixion in His glorified state.

Jesus kept His scars.

When Thomas demanded proof of the resurrection, Jesus didn't say, "Look at My perfect, unblemished body." He said, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side" (John 20:27, NASB).

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The proof of resurrection was the scars.

Think about that. The evidence that Jesus had conquered death, that He'd been raised in glory, that He was transformed and transcendent—the evidence was His wounds.

Not despite His wounds. Through them. *Because* of them.

This changes everything about how we understand glory.

We think glory means invulnerability. Perfection. No marks. No evidence of struggle. No scars.

But the Lamb in glory bears His scars. The risen Christ shows His wounds. The glorified body includes the marks of crucifixion.

Glory doesn't erase the scars. Glory transforms their meaning.

Before resurrection, Jesus' wounds were evidence of suffering and death. After resurrection, they're evidence of love and victory. Same scars. Different meaning.

Before, they said: "He was killed. This is tragedy." After, they say: "He conquered death. This is triumph."

Before, they marked defeat. After, they mark redemption.

The resurrection didn't erase the wounds. It redeemed them.

And this—this—is the hope for every wounded healer reading these words.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Your scars don't have to be erased to be redeemed. They don't have to disappear to be transformed. They don't have to be hidden to be part of your glory.

The resurrection pattern is this: Wounds become scars. Scars become testimony. Testimony becomes glory. And glory includes—not excludes—the marks of what you've survived.

You will bear your scars into glory. And they will be beautiful.

Not because the wounding was beautiful. Not because the suffering was good. But because redemption is real, and God specializes in making broken things whole without erasing their history.

Your father wounds? They'll be scars that tell the story of God's healing of attachment trauma.

Your ministry betrayal? It will be a scar that speaks of God's faithfulness when humans failed you.

Your depression? It will be a scar that testifies to God's presence in darkness.

Your moral failure? It will be a scar that displays the scandalous reach of grace.

Your losses, your trauma, your breaking—all of it will be transformed from sources of shame into testimonies of redemption.

That's what the glorified Christ promises. That's what His visible scars declare.

You don't have to be unbroken to be glorious. You just have to be redeemed.

A NEW KIND OF MINISTRY

So what does ministry look like when you understand this? What changes when you realize your scars are credentials, not disqualifications?

Everything.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

OLD MODEL OF MINISTRY:

- Hide your wounds. Perform strength. Maintain professional distance.
- Your value comes from your credentials, degrees, position.
- Success is measured in numbers, growth, influence, platform.
- Burnout is a badge of honor. Self-sacrifice proves devotion.
- Vulnerability is weakness. Asking for help is failure.
- You have to be the expert with all the answers.
- Your past struggles disqualify you from leadership.
- Ministry is about doing for others from a position of strength.

This model creates:

- Isolated ministers performing invulnerability
- Wounded leaders wounding others
- Burnout as the norm
- Codependent, unhealthy systems
- Ministers who can't be honest
- Congregations who learn to hide their struggles
- A revolving door of broken pastors

NEW MODEL OF MINISTRY:

- Be honest about your scars. Minister from healed places. Be authentically present.
- Your value comes from being God's beloved, full stop.
- Success is faithfulness, health, sustainable service, people growing.
- Burnout is a warning sign, not a goal. Self-care is stewardship.
- Vulnerability is strength. Asking for help is wisdom.
- You're a fellow pilgrim with wisdom to share, not a guru.
- Your healed struggles qualify you for specific ministry.
- Ministry is being with others from a place of shared humanity.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

This model creates:

- Ministers who are known and loved as humans
- Healed leaders serving from wholeness
- Sustainability as the norm
- Healthy, boundaried systems
- Ministers who model authenticity
- Congregations who can be honest about struggles
- Generations of faithful servants

This isn't theory. This is how Jesus did ministry.

He was fully divine and fully human. He had power but chose vulnerability. He had authority but chose servanthood. He had every right to remain untouchable but chose incarnation.

And after resurrection, He kept His scars. He modeled that glory includes marks of suffering redeemed.

This is the new—actually ancient—model of ministry: From scars, not wounds. From authenticity, not performance. From shared humanity, not manufactured superiority. From sustainable practices, not burnout culture. From healed places, not bleeding ones.

PRACTICALLY, THIS MEANS:

You **acknowledge your scars** without shame. You're not performing invulnerability. You're honest about your history, your struggles, your ongoing healing.

You **minister from healed places**. You've done the work—therapy, spiritual direction, your own healing journey. You're not using ministry to process your unhealed wounds.

You **maintain boundaries and self-care**. Sabbath is sacred. Therapy is budgeted. Support systems are built. You serve from fullness, not depletion.

You **point to Jesus, not to yourself**. Your story serves His glory. Your scars point to the Healer. You're a witness, not the savior.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

You **create authentic community**. Healing circles, not performance stages. Spaces where people can be honest, not spaces where people have to pretend.

You **serve for the long haul**. Decades of sustainable ministry, not a few years of burnout followed by collapse. You're in this for life because you're living in a way that sustains life.

This is the ministry the world desperately needs. This is the ministry wounded healers are uniquely positioned to provide.

Not despite your wounds. Through your scars. Not in spite of your brokenness. Because of your healing.

THE INVITATION

I want to speak directly to you now. You who are reading these words. You who picked up this book because something in the title resonated. You who are wounded, or healing, or wondering if your scars disqualify you from ministry.

They don't.

Here's what I know about you:

You've been wounded. Maybe in childhood. Maybe in ministry. Maybe through your own choices. Maybe through others' sins against you. Maybe through the simple brokenness of living in a fallen world. The source varies, but the pain is real.

You've wondered if you're too broken to serve. If your struggles mean you're not spiritual enough, strong enough, healed enough. If your history disqualifies you from leadership.

You've probably tried to hide your wounds. To perform strength you don't feel. To maintain a professional distance that protects you but also isolates you. To be the expert who has it all together.

And maybe—probably—you've discovered that the hiding is destroying you. That the performance is exhausting. That the isolation is unbearable. That you can't sustain this much longer.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

If that's you, this is your invitation:

Come out of hiding. Stop performing invulnerability. Let your scars be visible. Not inappropriately, not without boundaries, but honestly. You're human. It's okay to be human. It's more than okay—it's essential.

Do the healing work. Get therapy. Find a spiritual director. Join a recovery group. Take a sabbatical if you need one. Let your wounds heal into scars before you try to minister from them. Healing is not optional—it's the prerequisite for this kind of ministry.

Build support systems. You cannot do this alone. Find your people—therapist, spiritual director, peer group, close friends, faith community, recovery support. Multiple layers, redundancy built in. Let yourself be known, loved, held accountable, supported.

Develop resilience practices. Spiritual disciplines, Sabbath, rhythms of work and rest, boundaries, self-care. Not optional extras but essential infrastructure for sustainable ministry.

Let your scars become credentials. Not by making your story your identity, but by letting your healed wounds serve others. Your survival becomes hope for those still struggling. Your scars open doors that your credentials never would.

Minister from healed places. Not perfectly healed—you'll carry tender scars forever. But healed enough that sharing doesn't re-traumatize you. Healed enough that you're serving them, not using them to process your stuff.

Point to Jesus. Always. Your story is powerful, but He's the point. Your scars matter, but they point to the Healer. You're a witness to what He does, not the hero of your own story.

Build for the long haul. This isn't a sprint. This is a marathon. Decades of faithful service from healed places, not a few years of impressive ministry followed by collapse. Sustainability over intensity. Faithfulness over flash.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

THIS IS THE INVITATION:

Come as you are. Wounded. Scarred. Healing. In process. Broken and beloved. Struggling and sustained by grace. Human.

Come and discover that your scars are not your disqualification. They're your credentials.

Come and learn a new way—an ancient way, really—of doing ministry. From weakness, not strength. From authenticity, not performance. From scars, not wounds. From being with, not doing for. From sustainable practices, not burnout culture.

Come and join the community of wounded healers who've discovered that ministry from healed places is not only possible—it's powerful. More powerful than ministry from performed strength ever was.

Paul captures this perfectly:

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (2 Corinthians 4:7-10, NASB).

We are earthen vessels. Clay pots. Fragile. Cracked. Scarred. Not impressive in ourselves.

But we carry treasure. God's power, God's presence, God's glory—in these broken vessels.

And the brokenness is the point. So that the "surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves." If we were impressive, strong, invulnerable—who would get the glory? Us. But we're broken vessels carrying divine treasure—and everyone knows: This power isn't ours. It's His.

We are afflicted but not crushed. Wounded but not destroyed. Struck down but not out. Carrying about the dying of Jesus—our own deaths to self, our own sufferings, our own scars—so that the life of Jesus is manifested in our bodies.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Our weakness becomes the context for His strength. Our brokenness becomes the canvas for His restoration. Our scars become the testimony of His healing.

That's not despite our humanity. That's through it. That's the pattern. That's the invitation.

You're not too broken to serve. You're broken enough to serve authentically. Your scars are not your shame. They're your credentials.

WHAT COMES NEXT

If you're reading this and thinking, "Okay, I'm in. What now?"—here's what comes next:

1. GET HELP

Today. Not tomorrow. Not when things get worse. Today.

- Find a therapist. Call three, make appointments, pick one.
- Find a spiritual director. Ask around, get recommendations, schedule a session.
- Talk to your doctor about your physical and mental health.
- Don't do this alone. Get professional help.

2. BUILD YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEM

- Identify your people—who are your safe people?
- Find or create a peer group—other ministers who can be honest together
- Reconnect with friends outside ministry—people who know you as human, not role
- Join a recovery group if needed—AA, Codependents Anonymous, specific support groups
- Find a church where you can receive—if you don't have one

THE WOUNDED HEALER

3. CREATE YOUR RESILIENCE PROTOCOL

Go back to Chapter 15. Use the template. Actually fill it out. Then:

- Put it in your calendar
- Build your budget around it
- Tell your accountability people
- Start this week

4. GET HONEST

- With yourself—stop hiding from your own reality
- With God—bring your whole self, not just the presentable parts
- With safe people—let yourself be known
- With appropriate vulnerability in ministry—stop performing invulnerability

5. SET BOUNDARIES

- Time boundaries—when you work, when you don't
- Emotional boundaries—what's yours to carry, what's not
- Relational boundaries—appropriate professional distance
- Sabbath boundaries—one day per week, non-negotiable
- Say no without guilt—to things that violate your health

6. DO THE HEALING WORK

This is ongoing, not one-time:

- Keep going to therapy even when you feel better
- Continue spiritual direction even when you're not in crisis
- Work your recovery program even when you're doing well
- Maintain your healing practices even when they're inconvenient
- Let wounds become scars before you try to minister from them

THE WOUNDED HEALER

7. FIND YOUR LANE

What ministry are your scars preparing you for?

- What have you survived that qualifies you to help others survive it?
- What populations can you uniquely reach because of your story?
- What wisdom do you have from your healing journey?
- Don't try to do everything—do what your scars equip you to do

8. TELL YOUR STORY WISELY

- Know what layer to share in what context
- Share as tool, not trophy
- Point to Jesus, not yourself
- Protect others in your story
- Only share from scars, never from active wounds

9. BUILD FOR SUSTAINABILITY

- Think decades, not years
- Prioritize faithfulness over flash
- Choose health over hustle
- Create rhythms that can last
- Model for others what sustainable ministry looks like

10. STAY IN COMMUNITY

- Don't isolate
- Keep showing up to your support systems
- Be honest about struggles
- Receive help without shame
- Give and receive care

THE WOUNDED HEALER

THIS IS THE PATH FORWARD. IT'S NOT EASY. BUT IT'S SUSTAINABLE. IT'S AUTHENTIC. IT'S POWERFUL.

And it's the way of Jesus—the way of the Incarnation, the way of the Cross, the way of Resurrection with scars still visible.

A WORD TO SPECIFIC GROUPS

TO THOSE CURRENTLY WOUNDED AND BLEEDING:

You can't minister from this place yet. I know you want to. I know you feel called to. But you'll wound others if you try to serve from active wounds.

Get help first. Do the healing work. Let your wounds close. Let them become scars. Give it time—more time than you think you need.

Your ministry will come. But it will be more powerful, more sustainable, and less harmful if you let yourself heal first.

Don't rush this. The people you'll serve in five years will be glad you took the time to heal now.

TO THOSE IN RECOVERY:

Keep going. You're doing the hardest work. The work of facing yourself, your wounds, your patterns. The work of therapy and spiritual direction and support groups and difficult conversations.

Don't stop because you feel better. Keep going. Healing is ongoing. Scars need maintenance. Support systems need tending.

And know this: The work you're doing now is preparing you for ministry you can't even imagine yet. Your scars are becoming credentials. Your survival is becoming testimony. Your healing is becoming hope for others.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Keep going.

TO THOSE WITH MATURE SCARS:

You're ready. Your wounds have healed. You've done the work. You've built support systems. You're serving from healed places.

Now—use your scars. Speak from them. Minister from them. Let them be visible when appropriate. Let your story serve others. Let your survival give hope.

But keep tending your scars. Keep maintaining your health. Keep protecting your boundaries. Don't assume because you're healed you can stop the practices that keep you healed.

Your ministry from scars is powerful. Don't lose it by neglecting the care that makes it possible.

TO THOSE WHO'VE RELAPSED:

You tore a scar open. You're bleeding again. You thought you were healed, and now you're wounded.

I know the shame. I know the discouragement. I know the temptation to think you'll never really heal.

But scars can tear and re-heal. You're not starting from scratch. You've been here before. You know the path. Get help. Do the work again. Let it heal again.

And this time, when it heals, it will probably be stronger than before. Because you've learned from the re-injury. You know what caused it. You can protect better.

Don't give up. Re-healing is possible.

TO THOSE WATCHING WOUNDED MINISTERS:

Don't rush them. Don't push them back into ministry before they're ready. Don't make them prove they're healed.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Give them time. Give them space. Give them permission to be human. Give them support without expectation.

The church needs wounded healers who've actually healed. Not performers who hide wounds. Not ministers serving from bleeding places.

So be patient. Hold space. Offer support. And trust that God is doing healing work that will bear fruit—in His timing, not yours.

TO CHURCH LEADERS AND BOARDS:

Stop glorifying martyrdom. Stop rewarding burnout. Stop demanding that ministers sacrifice themselves on the altar of church growth.

Create cultures that value health over hustle. That prioritize sustainability over intensity. That model self-care as faithfulness, not selfishness.

Require Sabbath. Budget for therapy. Offer sabbaticals. Protect boundaries. Model vulnerability. Create healing circles, not performance stages.

The wounded healers serving your churches need your support, not your pressure. Give it to them.

THE COMMUNITY OF WOUNDED HEALERS

You're not alone in this.

There's a whole community of us—ministers who've been wounded, who've done healing work, who are learning to serve from scars rather than wounds.

We're pastors and chaplains and counselors and recovery leaders and worship leaders and youth workers and missionaries and denominational leaders and church planters and spiritual directors and nonprofit directors and marketplace ministers.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

We're people who've survived childhood trauma, ministry betrayal, moral failure, mental illness, addiction, loss, abuse, burnout, and every other kind of wounding imaginable.

We've done therapy. We've done spiritual direction. We've built support systems. We've developed resilience practices. We've learned to set boundaries without guilt. We've discovered that our scars are credentials, not disqualifications.

And we're serving—faithfully, sustainably, authentically. For decades, not just a few years. From healed places, not bleeding ones. With vulnerability, not performance. From compassion, not codependency. In community, not isolation.

We're proof that it's possible.

We're proof that you can survive wounding and still minister. That you can be wounded healer. That scars can serve. That sustainable ministry is real. That you don't have to burn out. That authenticity is more powerful than performance. That your story matters. That your survival gives hope.

And we're inviting you to join us.

Not to a literal organization (though there are great groups out there). But to a way of being in ministry. A way of understanding yourself, your wounds, your calling, your service.

A way that says:

- I'm human and that's okay
- I've been wounded and I'm healing
- My scars are part of my story, not separate from it
- I serve from healed places, not wounded ones
- I need support and I ask for it without shame
- I maintain boundaries and practice self-care
- I point to Jesus, not to myself
- I'm in this for the long haul

This is the community of wounded healers. And there's room for you here.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Your scars are welcome. Your story matters. Your survival is significant. Your ministry is needed.

Come as you are. Wounded and healing. Scarred and serving. Broken and beloved.

There's a place for you here.

FINAL BLESSING

So let me close with a blessing. A pastoral benediction for wounded healers everywhere. For you, reading these words, carrying your scars, wondering if you can really do this.

You can.

May the God who was wounded for you meet you in your woundedness.

May He sit with you in the ash heap without rushing you to rise.

May He give you grace to acknowledge your wounds without shame.

May He provide the help you need—therapy, spiritual direction, medical care, community, support.

May He grant you time and space and resources for healing.

May He give you courage to face what needs to be faced, feel what needs to be felt, grieve what needs to be grieved.

May your wounds heal into scars.

May the healing be deep, not just surface. May it be real, not performed. May it be thorough, taking all the time it needs.

May you discover that scars are stronger than original tissue. That what's been broken and healed can be more beautiful than what was never broken.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

May you learn to see your scars as testimony, not tragedy. As credentials, not disqualifications. As evidence of grace, not sources of shame.

May you minister from your scars, not your wounds.

May you develop the wisdom to know the difference. May you have the courage to share appropriately and the discernment to know when to be silent.

May your scars open doors to ministry you never imagined. May they give you credibility with the wounded. May they give you compassion with the struggling. May they give you authority with those who need to know survival is possible.

May you point always to Jesus, the Wounded Healer who kept His scars in glory and invites you to do the same.

May you build support systems that sustain you.

May you find safe people who know your scars and love you anyway. May you build community that holds you accountable and holds you up.

May you find the help you need—therapy that transforms, spiritual direction that guides, peer groups that understand, friends who accept.

May you never have to carry your scars alone.

May you develop resilience that lasts.

May you practice spiritual disciplines that maintain your healing. May you protect Sabbath as sacred. May you build boundaries without guilt. May you care for your body as temple.

May you develop rhythms of work and rest that sustain for decades, not just years. May you serve from fullness, never from depletion.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

May you last. May you stay. May you remain faithful for the long haul.

May you find your specific calling.

May you discover what ministry your scars prepare you for. May you serve the people only you can reach. May you offer the hope only your survival can give.

May you stay in your lane without comparison or envy. May you celebrate others' ministries while faithfully tending your own.

May you build something beautiful from your broken pieces.

May your scars become your glory.

May you carry them into resurrection, transformed but not erased. May they tell the story of survival, of grace, of redemption.

May they be beautiful, not shameful. May they be testimony, not tragedy. May they be light to others still in darkness.

May you discover that the Lamb who was slain is worthy. And you, bearing His image with your scars, are worthy too.

And may you know—deeply, truly, permanently—that you are beloved.

Not because you're unbroken. Not because you're impressive. Not because you've earned it or deserve it or achieved it.

But because you're His. You're His wounded, healing, scarred, serving, faithful, beloved child.

And that identity—that belovedness—is deeper than your wounding, stronger than your scars, more permanent than your struggles.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

You are wounded. You are healing. You are scarred. You are serving. You are beloved.

All of these. All at once. Forever.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you. Now and always. Amen.

THE END... AND THE BEGINNING

This is where the book ends. But it's where your journey continues.

You've read about wounds and scars, about healing and service, about authenticity and resilience. Now comes the hard work of living it.

It won't be easy. There will be setbacks and struggles. Scars will tear and need re-healing. Support systems will need tending. Boundaries will be tested. Resilience will require maintenance.

But it's worth it. Because on the other side of all that work is something beautiful:

Ministry that sustains instead of destroys.

Authenticity that connects instead of performs.

Scars that serve instead of shame.

A life that reflects the pattern of Jesus—wounded, resurrected, bearing scars in glory, and using those scars to heal others.

That's the invitation. That's the possibility. That's the promise.

Your wounds can become scars. Your scars can become credentials. Your survival can become hope. Your healing can become ministry. Your story can become testimony. Your life can become a living demonstration of resurrection.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Not despite what you've been through. Through it. Because of it. By the scandalous grace of a God who specializes in making broken things beautiful.

So go.

Get help. Do the work. Build support. Develop resilience. Let your wounds heal. Use your scars. Minister from healed places. Point to Jesus. Serve for the long haul.

Go and be the wounded healer God is calling you to be.

The world doesn't need more ministers performing invulnerability. The world needs wounded healers who've actually healed—who can sit with suffering because they've survived it, who can offer hope because they've experienced it, who can point to grace because they've received it.

The world needs you. Wounded. Healed. Scarred. Serving. Beloved.

Just as you are. Not despite what you are. But exactly because of what you've become through suffering and grace.

Welcome to the community of wounded healers.

Your scars are beautiful. Your ministry is needed. Your story matters.

Now go and minister from your scars, for the glory of the One who kept His own.

"And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain." — Revelation 5:6 (NASB)

The Lamb keeps His scars in glory.

So will you.

THE END

THE WOUNDED HEALER

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body."

— 2 Corinthians 4:7-10 (NASB)

THE WOUNDED HEALER

STUDY GUIDE

The Wounded Healer: Ministering from Your Scars

For individual reflection, small group processing, spiritual direction conversations, and ministry team development

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Recommended approach:

- Read one chapter per week
- Journal through the questions over several days
- Don't rush—let insights emerge naturally
- Be brutally honest (this is for you and God)
- Consider sharing key insights with a trusted friend or counselor
- Keep your written responses to track your journey

What you'll need:

- Journal or notebook
- Uninterrupted time (1-2 hours per chapter)
- Safe, quiet space for reflection
- Willingness to be honest with yourself

THE WOUNDED HEALER

FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Recommended approach:

- 90-120 minute sessions
- 6-10 participants maximum
- Establish clear confidentiality agreements first
- Choose 3-5 questions per session (don't try to cover all)
- Allow silence—don't rush to fill space
- Make space for both sharing and listening
- Close with prayer and mutual encouragement

Group covenant suggestions:

- Confidentiality is sacred
- Everyone participates, no one dominates
- Listen without fixing or advising
- Respect different processing speeds
- Honor when someone needs to pass
- Commit to the full journey together

FOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Recommended approach:

- Use questions as springboards for deeper exploration
- Let the directee choose questions that resonate
- Focus on where God is at work in their story
- Don't rush through material—one chapter might take multiple sessions
- Pay attention to resistance, emotion, energy
- Help directee discern action steps

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Director's role:

- Create safe space for honest exploration
- Ask clarifying questions without judgment
- Help directee notice God's presence in their wounds and healing
- Support without rescuing
- Hold the space for difficult emotions

FOR MINISTRY TEAMS

Recommended approach:

- Schedule extended time (half-day or full-day sessions)
- Use professional facilitator if needed
- Create psychological safety before diving deep
- Balance individual reflection with team sharing
- Develop team norms around vulnerability
- Create action plans for systemic changes

Team leader responsibilities:

- Model appropriate vulnerability
- Protect confidentiality
- Address team dynamics that emerge
- Ensure no one is pressured to share beyond comfort level
- Follow up on commitments made
- Seek help if team wounds are re-activated

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS BY CHAPTER

THE WOUNDED HEALER

INTRODUCTION: A Letter from the Wounded Healer

FOR REFLECTION:

1. What initially drew you to this book? What are you hoping to find or understand?
2. The author writes, "I am a wounded healer learning to minister from my scars." How would you describe your current state: wounded and bleeding, in healing process, scarred but tender, or healed and serving?
3. What's your initial reaction to the idea that your wounds might become your ministry credentials? Hope? Skepticism? Fear? Relief?
4. Who in your life has modeled "wounded healer" ministry for you? What did you learn from them?
5. What fears or resistance do you notice as you begin this journey?

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Have each person share (without details) one word that describes where they are in their healing journey right now.
2. Discuss: "What does 'wounded healer' mean to you? How is it different from just 'wounded' or just 'healer'?"
3. What would it mean for your team/church/ministry if leaders operated from healed wounds rather than performed invulnerability?
4. What covenant do we need to make as a group to create safety for this journey?

ACTION STEP:

Write a brief "before" snapshot of where you are right now—your wounds, your state of healing, your ministry, your hope. Seal it and reread it when you finish the book.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

PART ONE: RECOGNIZING THE WOUND

CHAPTER 1: The Minister's Secret Pain

FOR REFLECTION:

1. Review the three case studies (the senior pastor, the hospital chaplain, the worship leader). Which one resonates most with your experience? Why?
2. "Why ministry attracts the wounded"—does this describe you? Were you a childhood caretaker who professionalized survival skills?
3. What "secret pain" have you been carrying while performing strength in ministry? Write it down honestly.
4. Complete this sentence: "I'm afraid that if people knew _____ about me, they would _____."
5. What's the cost of hiding been for you personally? For your ministry? For your relationships?

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. What makes it hard to be honest about struggles in ministry culture? What implicit or explicit messages have you received about vulnerability?
2. Discuss the "performance trap"—how does your ministry context reward performance and punish authenticity?
3. What would change if you operated from the belief that "wounds don't heal in darkness, they fester"?
4. How do we create cultures where ministers can be honest without losing credibility or employment?

ACTION STEP:

Identify one person you can be more honest with this week. Practice saying: "I'm struggling with _____. Can I talk to you about it?"

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 2: The Anatomy of Woundedness

FOR REFLECTION:

1. Using the six wound categories, identify which ones you carry. Be specific about how each shows up in your life and ministry.
2. Triage your wounds: Which are red (active crisis), yellow (serious but stable), green (painful but manageable), or black (beyond your capacity)?
3. **For each wound you identified, write:**
 - What happened
 - How it's affected you
 - What healing would look like
 - What help you need
4. What unhealed wounds are you currently ministering from? How are they infecting your ministry?
5. The author confesses: "You're wounding people the way you've been wounded." Where might this be true for you?

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Share (at comfort level) which wound categories each person identifies with. Notice patterns in the group.
2. Discuss: "How do different types of wounds require different types of treatment?" What's been your experience with this?
3. What's the difference between acknowledging wounds and wallowing in victim identity? How do we avoid both denial and identification with brokenness?
4. If someone in this group was actively bleeding from wounds, how would we support them? What would we need?

ACTION STEP:

Schedule appointments with appropriate professionals based on your triage assessment. Red and yellow wounds need immediate attention—make those calls this week.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 3: The Cost of Unhealed Wounding

FOR REFLECTION:

1. Read the case studies (David, Marcus, the broader casualties) slowly. Where do you see yourself—in the wounded leader, in the one being wounded, or both?
2. "How wounds become weapons"—identify where you've unconsciously reenacted trauma, projected your issues, or spiritually bypassed.
3. Complete the "Warning Signs Assessment Tool" honestly. What's your score? What does it reveal?
4. Who have you wounded from your unhealed places? Write their names. What amends need to be made?
5. What patterns are you repeating that mirror the wounds you received? Be specific.

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Discuss the "cycle of hurt people hurting people." Where do you see this cycle in church/ministry culture? In your own leadership?
2. "The congregation as unwitting therapist"—what needs are you trying to meet through ministry that should be met in therapy?
3. How does ministry success mask personal devastation? Share examples from your own life or ministry.
4. What accountability structures need to be in place to prevent wounded leaders from creating wounded systems?

ACTION STEP:

If your assessment revealed significant warning signs, make three phone calls this week: therapist, trusted mentor, and someone in authority over you who needs to know you need help.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

PART TWO: THE HEALING JOURNEY

CHAPTER 4: Permission to Be Broken

FOR REFLECTION:

1. The author's therapist asked: "Why do you think you have to earn permission to exist?" How would you answer that question for yourself?
2. Where did you learn that you had to be superhuman to be valuable? What messages—explicit or implicit—taught you this?
3. Grace as "permission to be human"—what would change if you really believed this? What are you currently not allowing yourself?
4. Complete the "Brookeness Inventory" exercise (from the chapter). Actually do it—don't just think about it.
5. Write your own "Permission Statement" and sign it. Put it somewhere you'll see it daily.

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Share: What's the difference between "dying to self" (healthy) and "destroying self" (toxic) in your experience?
2. Discuss: "How does our ministry culture confuse self-sacrifice with self-destruction?" Give specific examples.
3. What would it look like for this group to give each other permission to be broken? What commitments would that require?
4. How do we tell the difference between healthy vulnerability and dumping/processing through others?

ACTION STEP:

Practice giving yourself permission this week. Choose one area where you typically judge yourself harshly and intentionally practice self-compassion instead.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 5: Sitting in the Ash Heap

FOR REFLECTION:

1. Where are you currently in the "ash heap"—what situation feels like ashes right now? Describe it honestly.
2. "Living your wounds through instead of thinking them through"—where are you trying to think your way through something that requires feeling?
3. What does "premature resurrection" look like in your life? Where are you trying to skip death and go straight to resurrection?
4. Complete this: "The hardest thing about sitting in the ash heap for me is _____."
5. Practice the "ministry of presence to yourself" this week. What do you notice?

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Share examples of spiritual bypassing—times you or others used religious language to avoid painful realities. What was the cost?
2. Discuss: "What's the difference between sitting with what is and wallowing in self-pity?" How do we discern?
3. If someone in this group is in the ash heap right now, what do they need from us? What would genuine presence look like?
4. How do we create space for lament in ministry contexts that pressure us toward constant positivity?

ACTION STEP:

Practice 15 minutes of daily sitting with what is—no fixing, no spiritualizing, no rushing. Journal what comes up.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 6: The Community of Fellow Pilgrims

FOR REFLECTION:

1. Map your current support system using the framework from the chapter. What layers are missing or weak?
2. "Isolation intensifies wounding"—how has isolation affected your healing? What keeps you isolated?
3. Identify safe people vs. unsafe people in your life using the criteria from the chapter. Who needs to have less access to your vulnerability?
4. What makes it hard for you to receive help? What story are you telling yourself about needing others?
5. Create your "Building Healing Community" action plan. Be specific about who, when, and how.

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Share: Who has been part of your healing community? What made them safe and helpful?
2. Discuss the difference between accountability groups and companionship. Which does your ministry culture emphasize? What's missing?
3. "Creating healing circles not performance stages"—what would have to change about this group for it to be a true healing circle?
4. How do we balance appropriate boundaries with genuine community? Where do we struggle with this?

ACTION STEP:

Take one concrete action this week to strengthen your support system: call a therapist, reach out to a potential peer group member, reconnect with a friend, etc.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

PART THREE: THE INTEGRATION

CHAPTER 7: Grace at Ground Zero

FOR REFLECTION:

1. The author asks: "Are you trying to heal in order to be loved by God, or are you healing because you're already loved?" How would you honestly answer?
2. Where are you still trying to earn what you already have? What's the evidence?
3. Bonhoeffer's "cheap grace vs. costly grace"—where might you be seeking cheap grace (permission to avoid change)? Where do you need to receive costly grace?
4. Complete: "The shame messages I carry are _____. What grace says in response is _____. "
5. What does self-compassion actually look like for you this week? Be specific and practical.

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Discuss: "Why is it so hard to believe grace really applies to us, even when we can preach it to others?"
2. Share examples of when someone showed you grace at ground zero—when you were broken and they loved you anyway. What did that do for you?
3. How does performance-based ministry undermine grace? What systems need to change?
4. Practice speaking grace to each other: "I see your _____ (struggle/wound/failure), and you're still beloved." How does it feel to receive this?

ACTION STEP:

Every time you notice self-criticism this week, stop and speak grace to yourself out loud: "I'm struggling with _____, and I'm still beloved."

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 8: From Wound to Scar

FOR REFLECTION:

1. Using the Wound-to-Scar Transformation diagram, identify where each of your major wounds is in the process.
2. What makes a wound a scar for you? Review the four necessary conditions—what's missing in your healing process?
3. Which of your scars are tender? Why? What specific care do they need?
4. Have any scars torn open (re-traumatization)? What triggered it? What does re-healing look like?
5. Write about one wound that has become a scar. Tell the story of that transformation.

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Discuss: "What's the difference between 'getting over it' and 'growing through it'?" Share personal examples.
2. Jesus kept His scars in resurrection. What does this mean for how we view our own scars?
3. How long does wound-to-scar transformation typically take for different types of wounds? What happens when we try to rush it?
4. What does "leading from a limp" look like practically? Who models this well?

ACTION STEP:

For one wound that's becoming a scar, create a specific care plan: What does ongoing maintenance look like? What protects it? What helps it stay healed?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 9: Redeeming Your Story

FOR REFLECTION:

1. Complete the "Crafting Your Redemptive Narrative" exercise from the chapter. Actually write it all out.
2. What's the redemptive theme that runs through your story? Write it as one clear sentence.
3. "Finding meaning in suffering without glorifying it"—where might you be glorifying your suffering? Where are you finding genuine redemptive meaning?
4. Who do you need to protect in your story? How will you tell truth while honoring their dignity?
5. What would it mean to fully own your story—all of it—without shame?

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Share your one-sentence redemptive narrative (from the exercise). What patterns do you notice across the group?
2. Discuss the difference between redemption and erasure. How does the culture (church/ministry) pressure us toward erasure?
3. Look at the biblical examples (Joseph, David, Peter, Paul). What do these stories teach about how God redeems, not erases?
4. How do we honor the terrible reality of what happened while also acknowledging God's redemptive work? Practice this balance together.

ACTION STEP:

Write a letter to your younger self at the moment of deepest wounding. What would you tell them about redemption? What hope would you offer?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 10: The Crucified Minister

FOR REFLECTION:

1. Meditate on Philippians 2:5-11. What does Jesus' kenosis (self-emptying) reveal about ministry? How does this challenge you?
2. Where are you confusing "dying to self" with "destroying self"? What needs to change?
3. The scandal of the scarred Savior—what does it mean to you that Jesus kept His scars in glory?
4. Complete the Contemplation exercise: Contemplate Christ's wounds. Journal what He might say to you about your wounds.
5. How do Jesus' scars authenticate His ministry? How might your scars authenticate yours?

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Discuss Moltmann's quote: "God is not more divine than He is in this humanity." What does this mean for how we understand strength, power, and ministry?
2. Cruciform ministry—what would ministry shaped like the cross actually look like in your context? Be specific.
3. Where does your ministry culture confuse self-destruction with faithfulness? How do we resist this?
4. Practice together: What would it mean to minister "from the cross" (redemptive suffering chosen for purpose) vs. "from the wound" (just suffering)?

ACTION STEP:

This week, when facing ministry challenges, ask: "What does the crucified and risen Christ reveal about how to handle this?" Journal the insights.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

PART FOUR: MINISTRY FROM SCARS

CHAPTER 11: Authority Born of Suffering

FOR REFLECTION:

1. What's the difference between positional and experiential authority in your ministry? Which do you rely on more?
2. Create an inventory of your scars and what ministry each one qualifies you for. Be specific.
3. What's your "thorn in the flesh"—the ongoing struggle you've prayed for God to remove? How might it be qualifying you rather than disqualifying you?
4. Review the case studies (Sarah, Marcus, Jennifer, David). Which one most inspires you? Why?
5. How can you "put your woundedness in service of others" (Nouwen) this week?

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Share: When has someone's shared experience created instant credibility and connection for you? What made it powerful?
2. Discuss: "Why do scars give you credibility in ways credentials never will?" Give specific examples.
3. How do we honor both positional and experiential authority in ministry? What's the right balance?
4. What populations can this group uniquely reach because of your collective scars?

ACTION STEP:

Identify one person you can help this week specifically because of what you've survived. Reach out to them.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 12: Compassion Without Codependency

FOR REFLECTION:

1. Complete the Codependency vs. Compassion Assessment honestly. What's your score? What does it reveal?
2. Where are you currently drowning while trying to rescue others? Be specific.
3. Do you have a savior complex or messiah identity? What needs are you meeting through being needed?
4. Map your current boundaries (time, emotional, physical, scope, relational). Which are weak or non-existent?
5. What's your "oxygen"—what do you need to function? Are you getting it?

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Discuss the rescue paradox: "You can't save others if you're drowning too." Where do you see this playing out in your ministry?
2. What makes saying "no" so difficult in ministry culture? What would have to change to make boundaries acceptable?
3. Share your oxygen mask principle: What keeps you alive and functional? How do you protect it?
4. How do we distinguish between dying to self (healthy) and codependent self-sacrifice (unhealthy)?

ACTION STEP:

Set one new boundary this week and hold it, even if people push back. Notice what comes up for you.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 13: The Ministry of Presence

FOR REFLECTION:

1. When have you experienced genuine presence from another person? What made it powerful?
2. Where do you tend toward "doing for" when you should be "being with"? Why is doing more comfortable?
3. Practice sacred silence this week. Sit with God, with yourself, with another person—without filling the space with words. Journal what emerges.
4. What makes vulnerability difficult for you? What would appropriate vulnerability look like in your ministry?
5. How comfortable are you with your own humanity being visible? What do you hide and why?

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Share the difference between empathy and enmeshment in your experience. Where do you struggle to maintain that boundary?
2. Practice together: Sit in shared silence for 5 minutes. Then discuss: What was that like? What came up?
3. Discuss: "Why is presence often more powerful than answers?" Share examples from your life.
4. How do we create ministry cultures that value presence over productivity?

ACTION STEP:

Practice the ministry of presence this week: Be with someone in their pain without trying to fix it, explain it, or spiritualize it. Just be.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

CHAPTER 14: Speaking from Your Scars

FOR REFLECTION:

1. Is your testimony a tool you use to serve others, or a trophy you display to impress them? How do you know?
2. Apply the "healed enough to help" principle to each of your major wounds. Which are you ready to share from? Which need more healing?
3. Who do you need to protect in your story? Have those conversations or make those decisions this week.
4. Practice the Five Layers: What would you share in each context? What belongs in Layer 5 (private/sacred)?
5. When was the last time you chose NOT to share your story when you could have? What wisdom led to that decision?

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Share examples of testimony shared well (as tool) vs. shared poorly (as trophy). What made the difference?
2. Discuss: "How do we balance transparency with appropriate boundaries?" Where do you struggle with this?
3. Practice together: Each person share a 2-minute version of part of their story—brief enough to connect, not so long it dominates. Give each other feedback.
4. What accountability do we need around how we share our stories publicly?

ACTION STEP:

Write out your story in layers (1-5) this week. Practice discerning what's appropriate for which context.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

PART FIVE: SUSTAINING WHOLENESS

CHAPTER 15: Building Resilience

FOR REFLECTION:

1. Honestly assess your spiritual and emotional fitness right now. Would you pass the annual test?
2. Which of the seven essential spiritual disciplines (prayer, Scripture, Sabbath, community, therapy/spiritual direction, solitude, physical care) are you actually practicing consistently?
3. Complete the Personal Resilience Protocol template. Actually fill in every section, then calendar and budget it.
4. What's your actual rhythm of work and rest? Chart your last month. What needs to change?
5. How is your Sabbath practice? If you don't have one, what's stopping you?

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Share what's in your resilience protocol. What are your non-negotiables? What's your plan for maintaining them?
2. Discuss: "What does Sabbath as resistance to performance mean practically?" How do we actually do this?
3. What triggers and vulnerabilities do you each have? How can this group help you manage them?
4. What support systems does this group need to build or strengthen together?

ACTION STEP:

Implement your resilience protocol this week. Start with daily non-negotiables. Tell your accountability people about it.

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CONCLUSION: The Beautiful Scars

FOR REFLECTION:

1. How has your understanding of your scars changed through this book? What's different now?
2. Reread the "before snapshot" you wrote at the beginning. What's changed? What's emerged? What's next?
3. What specific invitation from this book are you accepting? What are you committing to?
4. Who do you need to share this journey with? Who needs to know what you're committing to?
5. Write your own blessing for yourself as a wounded healer.

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Share: What's one key insight or change from this journey through the book?
2. What does "a new kind of ministry" look like for this group going forward? What are we committing to?
3. How will you hold each other accountable to the resilience protocols and commitments made?
4. What do wounded healers in your context need from this group? How will you support them?

ACTION STEP:

Write a letter to yourself to open in six months. What do you hope will be true then? What commitments are you making now? Seal it and give it to someone who will send it to you in six months.

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES AND RESOURCES

CREATING A HEALING TIMELINE

Instructions: Draw a timeline of your life. Mark significant wounds with a dot below the line (depth indicates severity). Mark significant healing moments with a dot above the line (height indicates impact). Connect the dots. What patterns emerge? Where are you now?

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Questions:

- What wounds are still below the line (unhealed)?
- What healing has brought you above the line?
- What's the trajectory—toward more wounding or more healing?
- What would the next 5 years look like if you prioritized healing?

WOUND/SCAR INVENTORY WORKSHEET

For each significant wound:

THE WOUND:

- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Who was involved?
- What was damaged/lost?

CURRENT STATUS:

- Is this still an active wound or a scar?
- If wound: What stage of healing? (inflammation, proliferation, maturation)
- If scar: Is it tender? What triggers it?

TREATMENT NEEDED:

- What professional help is needed?
- What support systems?
- What practices?
- What boundaries?

MINISTRY POTENTIAL:

- Once healed, what ministry could this scar enable?
- Who could you help who carries similar wounds?
- What wisdom do you have from this experience?

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BOUNDARY-SETTING PRACTICE

Template for Setting Boundaries:

"I need to set a boundary around _____.

Going forward, I will _____ [what you will do].

This is because _____ [brief reason—not justification].

I appreciate your understanding."

Practice scenarios:

1. Setting office hours
2. Protecting Sabbath
3. Limiting counseling sessions
4. Saying no to additional responsibilities
5. Creating emotional boundaries with difficult people

SUPPORT SYSTEM BUILDER

Use this chart to identify and strengthen your support system:

Layer

Current Person/Group

Strength (1-10)

Next Action

By When

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Therapist

Spiritual Director

Doctor/Psychiatrist

Peer Group

Close Friends

Family

Faith Community

Recovery/Support Group

Action Steps:

- Any layer with strength below 5 needs immediate attention
- Any missing layer needs to be built
- Schedule reviews quarterly to assess

RESILIENCE PROTOCOL REVIEW

Quarterly Check-In Questions:

1. Am I maintaining my daily non-negotiables? (yes/no for each)
2. Am I protecting my weekly rhythms? (Sabbath, therapy, peer group, etc.)
3. Have I completed my monthly practices? (retreat day, spiritual direction, etc.)
4. What symptoms of burnout am I experiencing? (rate 1-10)
5. How are my key relationships? (rate 1-10)
6. Is my soul okay? (honest assessment)
7. What needs to change in the next quarter?
8. Who needs to know about these changes?

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MINISTRY FROM SCARS ASSESSMENT

Use this to evaluate whether you're ministering from wounds or scars:

For each ministry activity, ask:

1. Motivation Check:

- Am I doing this from fullness or depletion?
- Am I serving them or meeting my own needs?
- Do I need their response to feel good about myself?

2. Boundary Check:

- Am I maintaining appropriate boundaries?
- Is this sustainable long-term?
- Am I protecting my health while serving?

3. Healing Check:

- Am I sharing from scars or bleeding on them?
- Can I handle triggers without dysregulating?
- Is this helping them or processing my stuff?

4. Effectiveness Check:

- Is this actually serving them?
- Are they growing/healing?
- Is this creating dependency or empowerment?

Score each 1-5. Total below 12 = need to step back and reassess.

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FACILITATOR NOTES

FOR SMALL GROUP LEADERS

Creating Safety:

- Establish clear confidentiality agreements first session
- Model appropriate vulnerability yourself
- Don't force sharing—allow people to pass
- Watch for members who dominate or never share
- Create space for silence and reflection
- Have resources ready for members in crisis

Managing Difficult Moments:

- If someone shares active trauma, acknowledge it and suggest professional help—don't try to fix it in group
- If someone is actively bleeding (not scarred), gently redirect and offer to connect them to resources
- If conflict emerges, address it directly but compassionately
- If someone's sharing triggers others, take a break and check in

Keeping Groups Healthy:

- Don't let one person's story dominate every session
- Balance support with challenge—sometimes people need both
- Watch for codependent dynamics
- Ensure the group doesn't become therapy (that's what therapists are for)
- Help members develop action plans, not just process feelings

Red Flags to Watch For:

- Suicidal ideation or self-harm
- Active addiction
- Severe mental health crisis
- Domestic violence or abuse situations
- Boundary violations within the group

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When to Refer Out:

- Issues requiring professional help (always)
- When someone needs more than peer support
- When group dynamics become toxic
- When someone is in active crisis

FOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS

Using This Material:

- Let directee set pace—don't rush through chapters
- Pay attention to what creates energy/resistance
- Notice where God seems to be particularly present
- Help directee discern between wounds and scars
- Support without rescuing
- Encourage professional help when needed

Key Questions to Explore:

- Where is God in your wounding?
- Where is God in your healing?
- What is God inviting you to?
- What are you afraid to surrender?
- Where is grace breaking through?

Discernment Focus:

- Is this person healed enough to help?
- What is God calling them to specifically?
- What needs to heal before they can serve from it?
- What support systems need strengthening?
- What boundaries need establishing?

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FOR MINISTRY TEAMS

Using This Book for Team Development:

Pre-Work (Before First Session):

- Have each team member read book individually
- Complete personal resilience protocol
- Identify their primary wounds and scars
- Prepare to share appropriately

Session 1: Creating Safety

- Establish team covenant
- Share why you're doing this work together
- Discuss fears and hopes
- Create confidentiality agreements

Session 2: Recognizing Wounds

- Share (at comfort level) primary wounds
- Discuss how wounds affect team dynamics
- Identify patterns in team functioning
- Acknowledge ways team may wound each other

Session 3: The Healing Journey

- Each person shares where they are in healing
- Identify support needs
- Discuss what team can/can't provide
- Create accountability structures

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Session 4: Ministry from Scars

- Share how scars qualify team for specific ministry
- Discuss collective scars and ministry capacity
- Plan for using team's scars redemptively
- Establish ongoing support

Session 5: Building Resilience

- Share resilience protocols
- Discuss team rhythms and boundaries
- Address systemic issues creating burnout
- Commit to sustainable practices
- Plan quarterly check-ins

Ongoing:

- Quarterly team check-ins on health
- Annual team retreat for deeper work
- Regular supervision/consultation
- Celebration of healing milestones

CLOSING WORDS FOR STUDY GUIDE USERS

This journey from wound to scar is not quick or easy. It requires:

- Honest self-assessment
- Professional help
- Supportive community
- Time and patience
- Ongoing maintenance
- Courage to face what you'd rather avoid

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But it's worth it. Because on the other side is:

- Sustainable ministry
- Authentic relationships
- Healed places serving others
- Scars that testify to grace
- Life that reflects resurrection
- Ministry that lasts

You don't have to do this alone. Use this guide. Find your people. Do the work. Build support. Maintain resilience. Serve from scars.

Your wounds can become scars. Your scars can become credentials. Your story can become testimony.

May your journey from wound to scar be marked by grace, supported by community, and sustained by hope.

Blessings on your healing journey.

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves." — 2 Corinthians 4:7 (NASB)