

WOUNDED HEALERS: Thriving in Helping Professions Without Losing Yourself

***A Beloved Rising Resource for Counselors, Nurses, Social Workers,
Pastors, and Caregivers***

WOUNDED HEALERS

Thriving in Helping Professions Without Losing Yourself

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Introduction

Beloved First, Helper Second

You were never meant to save anyone.

I know that might sound strange coming from someone writing a book for helpers, healers, counselors, pastors, social workers, nurses, and anyone else whose vocation involves walking alongside people in pain. But stay with me, because this might be the most important truth you encounter in these pages.

Somewhere along the way—perhaps in graduate school, maybe during your ordination, or possibly in that season when everyone seemed to need you at once—you likely absorbed a dangerous lie: that your worth is measured by your usefulness. That being needed is the same as being valuable. That if you're not healing others, helping others, fixing others, you're somehow failing at your purpose.

But before you were ever called to be a helper, you were called Beloved.

Before your first client walked through your door, before you preached your first sermon, before you held the hand of your first patient—you were already complete, already cherished, already enough in God's eyes. Your identity was secure not in what you could do for others, but in what Christ has already done for you. You are Beloved before you are useful. This isn't just a nice sentiment to cross-stitch on a pillow. It's the foundation that determines whether you'll flourish in your calling or eventually burn out trying to earn a love you already possess.

The Weight We Were Never Meant to Carry

God calls us to care, but not to carry what only He can hold.

There's a subtle but critical difference between compassion and compulsion, between caring for people and believing you're responsible for their outcomes. Those of us in helping professions often blur this line until we can't see it anymore. We take phone calls at midnight (when boundaries might have

been better). We absorb others' anxiety as if it's our own. We lie awake replaying conversations, wondering if we said the right thing, did enough, were enough.

We become atlas figures, convinced that if we stop holding up the world, everything will collapse.

But here's what we forget: there's already someone holding the world, and it isn't you. God invites us to participate in His healing work, but He never asked us to be Him. The weight of other people's transformation, healing, and salvation was never ours to carry. When we try to bear what only God can hold, we don't just exhaust ourselves—we actually get in the way of what He's trying to do.

The Identity Trap

Perhaps nothing threatens helpers more than confusing ministry effectiveness with identity.

It's an easy trap to fall into. After all, when you're good at helping people, you receive consistent reinforcement. Clients thank you. People tell you you're gifted. You see real transformation happen through your work, and it feels like evidence that you're finally becoming who you were meant to be.

But slowly, imperceptibly, something shifts. Your calling becomes your identity. Your effectiveness becomes your value. And suddenly, you need people to need you. You need to see results. You need the affirmation that comes from being the helper, the healer, the one who has it together enough to fix what's broken in others.

When this happens, you're no longer serving from a place of wholeness—you're serving from a place of lack, trying to fill in yourself what only God can fill. And the people you're trying to help? They become supporting characters in your story of proving your worth rather than beloved individuals on their own journey with God.

This is how wounded healers are made. Not because we experienced pain—everyone has—but because we tried to heal ourselves through healing others.

The Journey Ahead

This book is about a different way.

It's about healing as we heal—acknowledging that we don't need to be perfectly whole to be used by God, but we do need to be honest about our wounds and actively engaged in our own healing process. It's about living from God instead of for approval—learning to work from a place of rest rather than striving, giving from fullness rather than emptiness.

In the pages ahead, we'll explore:

How to recognize when you're serving from woundedness rather than wholeness, and what to do about it when you notice those patterns.

The spiritual and psychological dynamics of codependency in helping professions, and why being "nice" isn't the same as being loving.

Practical ways to establish boundaries without guilt, including how to say no even when people really do need help.

How to grieve well in professions soaked with loss, because unprocessed grief accumulates until it hardens into cynicism or compassion fatigue.

The practice of Sabbath not as a luxury but as an act of resistance against cultures that measure humans by their productivity.

What it means to receive care when you're used to being the caregiver, and why this might be one of the most important spiritual disciplines for helpers.

This won't be a book of simple solutions or cheerful platitudes. Thriving in helping professions without losing yourself requires deep work—the kind that often feels uncomfortable, the kind that asks you to examine not just your behaviors but the beliefs underneath them.

But it's possible. I've seen it in my own journey and in the lives of countless helpers who've learned to do their work from a place of belovedness rather

than a place of proving. They're still compassionate, still effective, still deeply committed to their calling. But they're also more whole, more present, more human.

They've learned what we're all invited to learn: that the greatest gift you can give the people you serve isn't your strength—it's your willingness to remain connected to the Source of all strength, even when (especially when) you have nothing left to give.

You are Beloved first. Helper second.

Everything else flows from remembering that order.

Chapter 1

The Calling to Care: God's Heart for the Hurting

There's a moment in the Gospel of Matthew that has always undone me. Jesus has been traveling through the towns and villages, teaching and healing, and Matthew tells us that when He saw the crowds, He "had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36).

The Greek word translated "compassion" here is *splagchnizomai*—it means to be moved in your gut, to feel something so deeply it's almost physical. This wasn't a detached, clinical observation of human suffering. Jesus *felt* it. The pain of the people around Him moved Him from the inside out.

And here's what strikes me: this compassion didn't drive Him to anxious striving or burnout. It didn't make Him lose Himself in an endless attempt to fix everyone's problems. Instead, it flowed from His secure connection to the Father, and it led Him to do exactly what the Father was doing—no more, no less.

Jesus is our model for caregiving. And if we're going to thrive in helping professions without losing ourselves, we need to understand not just *what* He did, but *how* He did it and *where* it came from.

The Great Shepherd Who Knows His Sheep

Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd—the one who knows His sheep, who calls them by name, who lays down His life for them (John 10:11-14). This wasn't just a metaphor; it was an identity claim rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures where God Himself is portrayed as the Shepherd of Israel.

When Jesus healed the sick, touched the untouchable, and sat with the sinner, He was embodying the heart of God toward hurting people. Isaiah 61 prophesied about this ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has

sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound" (Isaiah 61:1).

Jesus came to heal, to restore, to set people free. His entire ministry was oriented toward the broken and the suffering. And then—remarkably—He invited us to join Him in this work.

But here's what we must not miss: Jesus' caregiving flowed from His belovedness, not toward it. He didn't heal people to prove He was the Son of God. He healed people *because* He was the Son of God, secure in the Father's love, doing what He saw the Father doing.

Listen to how He described it: "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise" (John 5:19). Jesus' ministry wasn't driven by compulsion, guilt, or a need to prove Himself. It was the natural overflow of perfect union with God.

This is the model we're invited into—not to be saviors, but to participate in the saving work that God is already doing, sustained by our connection to Him.

Why We're Drawn to Care

If you're reading this book, you probably don't need much convincing that caring for hurting people matters. Something in you has always been drawn to the wounded, the struggling, the ones everyone else walks past.

But have you ever stopped to ask *why*?

Spiritual Gifting

For some, the call to care is a clear spiritual gifting—what Scripture describes as the gift of mercy, helping, or healing. You're the person who notices when someone's hurting before they say a word. You're the one people naturally open up to. You sense needs others miss, and you feel compelled to respond.

This isn't personality—it's design. God has wired certain people with heightened sensitivity to suffering and a supernatural capacity to bring

comfort. If this is you, your compassion is a gift from God, meant to reflect His heart to a broken world.

Story-Formed Compassion

For others, the call to care grew out of your own story. Maybe you experienced suffering that no one helped you navigate, and you promised yourself you'd be there for others in ways no one was there for you. Maybe someone showed you extraordinary kindness in your darkest moment, and you want to pass that gift forward.

Perhaps you grew up in a family where you learned early to be the caretaker, the peacemaker, the one who holds everyone together. Or maybe you witnessed suffering that marked you—a parent's mental illness, a sibling's addiction, a friend's tragedy—and it shaped the trajectory of your life.

This kind of compassion is often the most powerful because it's been refined in the fire of real experience. You don't just understand suffering theoretically; you know what it tastes like. And that gives you a capacity for empathy that can't be taught in any graduate program.

Mercy Wiring

Then there are those who seem to have been born with what I call "mercy wiring"—a deep, almost involuntary emotional resonance with pain. You're the child who cried when you saw a dead bird, the teenager who couldn't sleep knowing someone at school was being bullied, the adult who feels the weight of the world's suffering as if it's your own.

This sensitivity is both a gift and a burden. It allows you to enter into people's pain in profound ways, but it also means you're constantly at risk of being overwhelmed by suffering you can't fix.

A Sacred Mixture

Most likely, your call to care involves some combination of all three—spiritual gifting confirmed by your story, refined through your experiences, and expressed through your particular emotional wiring. This isn't accidental. God

often uses our deepest wounds to create our greatest ministry, redeeming what was meant to harm us and transforming it into a conduit for His healing.

But—and this is crucial—a calling from God doesn't mean we're supposed to carry what only God can carry. And this is where even the most beautiful, Spirit-led compassion can slip into something darker.

When Calling Becomes Compulsion

There's a line between caring for people because God has called you to and caring for people because you need them to need you. And that line is often invisible until you've already crossed it.

I've crossed it more times than I can count.

I remember the season when I realized I couldn't *not* check my phone. Even on vacation, even during family dinners, even at 2 a.m.—because what if someone needed me? What if there was a crisis and I wasn't available? What if I missed the moment I could have made a difference?

On the surface, this looked like radical availability. Deep down, it was compulsion.

I had to be needed. I had to be the helper. Because somewhere along the way, my identity had become so entangled with my usefulness that I didn't know who I was when I wasn't solving someone's problem.

The Warning Signs

How do you know when your calling has become a compulsion? Here are some signs:

You feel anxious when you're not helping. Rest feels like irresponsibility. Sabbath feels like selfishness. You can't be fully present anywhere because part of you is always thinking about who might need you.

Your sense of worth rises and falls with your ministry results. A good counseling session leaves you feeling valuable. A client who doesn't improve

leaves you questioning your calling. You need people to get better so you can feel okay about yourself.

You find yourself resentful but unable to say no. You say yes to every request, every need, every crisis—then feel angry that no one else is stepping up. But you can't stop, because being needed feels necessary to your sense of self.

You're more comfortable giving than receiving. Being vulnerable feels impossible. Asking for help feels like failure. You're drawn to relationships where you're the strong one, the helper, the one with it together—because being on the receiving end terrifies you.

You avoid dealing with your own pain by focusing on others' pain. It's easier to counsel someone through their anxiety than to face your own. Simpler to walk someone through grief than to feel your own. Your clients' problems become a respectable place to hide from your own.

You secretly need people to stay broken. This is the darkest sign, the one we rarely admit even to ourselves. But if your identity is wrapped up in being the helper, then people getting truly whole becomes a threat. You might sabotage their healing, keep them dependent, or subtly communicate that they still need you.

When calling becomes compulsion, we're no longer participating in God's healing work—we're using people to medicate our own wounds.

The Question Beneath the Question

All of this brings us to the reflection that sits at the heart of this chapter, and perhaps this entire book:

Am I responding to God's love—or trying to earn it?

This question exposes the fault line between healthy ministry and destructive codependency. It's the difference between working from rest and working for rest. Between giving from fullness and giving to fill a void.

Here's what responding to God's love looks like: You know you're beloved. Not because of what you've accomplished, but because of who God says you are. From that secure place, you're free to care for others without needing anything from them. You can celebrate when they heal because their healing isn't about you. You can rest without guilt because your worth isn't tied to your productivity. You can receive care from others because you don't have to be strong all the time to matter.

But trying to earn God's love looks different: You're never quite sure you're enough, so you keep striving to prove your worth through your helpfulness. Every success temporarily quiets the voice that says you're not valuable, but it never silences it completely. You're terrified of disappointing people because disappointing them feels like losing your reason to exist. You can't rest because resting might mean you're not doing enough. And deep down, you're not sure God would love you if you stopped being useful.

Jesus addressed this directly when He said, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5).

Notice the order: abiding comes first, fruit comes second. Connection precedes production. Being with Jesus is the source; ministry is the overflow.

But so often we reverse this. We try to earn connection through production. We try to prove we're worthy branches by how much fruit we bear. And we end up exhausted, disconnected, and wondering why the work that once felt life-giving now feels like it's draining the life out of us.

Coming Home to Belovedness

The good news is that we don't have to stay in this place.

God isn't calling us to stop caring. He's calling us to care from a different place—from the security of knowing we're beloved first, helpers second. From

the restfulness of trusting that He's the one doing the ultimate work of healing, and we're simply privileged to participate.

This doesn't mean the call to care goes away. If anything, it becomes purer, stronger, more sustainable. Because when you're not using ministry to earn love, you're free to actually love. When you're not healing others to avoid your own wounds, you can offer the kind of grounded presence that actually facilitates transformation.

The journey from compulsion back to calling isn't quick or easy. It requires us to look honestly at the beliefs beneath our behavior, to grieve the ways we've tried to save ourselves through saving others, and to learn what it means to receive the love we've been trying to earn.

But it's worth it. Because on the other side of this work is a kind of ministry that doesn't destroy you—the kind that flows from the abundance of knowing you're loved, not the desperation of trying to prove you're worth loving.

Pause and Reflect:

Before moving forward, take some time with these questions. You might want to journal your responses, or simply sit with them in prayer.

1. When did you first sense a call to care for hurting people? What was that like?
2. As you read the warning signs of calling becoming compulsion, which ones resonated most? What might they be revealing?
3. If you're honest with yourself, how much of your caregiving flows from responding to God's love versus trying to earn love (from God, from others, or from yourself)?
4. What would it look like to care for people from a place of already being beloved rather than trying to become worthy through your helpfulness?

Don't rush past these questions. The awareness they create is the first step toward the freedom you're longing for.

Chapter 2

The Weary Servant: Burnout, Compassion Fatigue & Soul Exhaustion

There's a particular kind of tired that sleep doesn't fix.

You know the one. You wake up already exhausted. You drag yourself through the day on autopilot, doing all the right things, saying all the right words, but feeling almost nothing. You're present in body but absent in spirit, going through the motions of caring while your soul whispers that it has nothing left to give.

You used to feel things deeply—your clients' pain, your congregation's struggles, your patients' suffering. It moved you. It motivated you. It felt like evidence that you were doing what you were made to do.

Now? You feel mostly numb. Or worse, you feel resentful. Annoyed by the very needs you once felt honored to meet. You catch yourself thinking things that shame you: *Not this again. Can't someone else deal with this? I just want to be left alone.*

And then you feel guilty for feeling that way, so you try harder. You paste on a smile, rally your remaining energy, and push through. Because that's what helpers do, right? We show up. We keep going. We don't quit just because we're tired.

Except this isn't just tired. This is burnout. This is compassion fatigue. This is soul exhaustion.

And it's trying to tell you something important.

Three Kinds of Empty

Not all exhaustion is created equal. Understanding the difference between emotional, spiritual, and vocational fatigue is crucial because each requires a different kind of response.

Emotional Fatigue: When Your Heart Goes Numb

Emotional fatigue happens when you've absorbed too much pain without adequate space to process it. It's the cumulative effect of holding space for trauma, grief, anxiety, and suffering—day after day, session after session, crisis after crisis.

The signs of emotional fatigue include:

- **Numbing.** You stop feeling things as deeply. Your empathy feels forced or absent entirely.
- **Emotional volatility.** You cry at commercials but can't cry about things that actually matter. Or you find yourself irritable and short-tempered over minor inconveniences.
- **Detachment.** You create increasing distance between yourself and the people you're helping, viewing them as problems to solve rather than humans to care for.
- **Intrusive thoughts.** Your clients' stories invade your off-hours. You can't stop thinking about them, dreaming about them, carrying their pain even when you're not at work.

Emotional fatigue is your psyche's way of self-protecting. When the heart absorbs more than it can hold, it starts to shut down. Not because you're weak, but because you're human.

Spiritual Fatigue: When Prayer Feels Like One More Task

Spiritual fatigue is different. It's a weariness in your relationship with God—a sense that you have nothing left to offer Him and you're not sure He has anything left to offer you.

You might still be doing all the spiritual disciplines—reading Scripture, praying, maybe even leading worship or preaching—but it feels mechanical. The intimacy is gone. Prayer becomes another item on your to-do list instead of a place of refuge. Scripture reading feels like studying for a test instead of encountering a Person.

The signs of spiritual fatigue include:

- **Going through the motions.** Your spiritual practices are perfunctory, done out of obligation rather than desire.
- **Silence from God.** Not the rich, restful silence of contemplative prayer, but a hollow emptiness where you used to sense His presence.
- **Cynicism about faith.** You find yourself doubting things you once believed deeply. Not honest questioning, but weary skepticism.
- **Ministry without connection.** You're serving God without being with God. You're working for Him but not from Him.

Spiritual fatigue often comes from trying to give spiritually without receiving spiritually. We become so focused on being a channel of God's grace to others that we forget we also need to receive that grace ourselves.

Vocational Fatigue: When Your Calling Feels Like a Burden

Vocational fatigue is perhaps the most destabilizing because it makes you question your entire life direction. This is when you start fantasizing about different careers, different callings, different lives—anything but this.

The signs of vocational fatigue include:

- **Dread.** Sunday night (or whatever precedes your workweek) fills you with anxiety. You can't imagine doing this for another year, let alone another decade.
- **Meaninglessness.** The work that once felt significant now feels pointless. You wonder if you're making any difference at all.
- **Fantasizing about escape.** You daydream about quitting, moving away, starting over in a completely different field.
- **Loss of competence.** You feel like you're not good at this anymore. Skills that once came naturally now feel forced and ineffective.

Vocational fatigue often emerges when there's a mismatch between your actual work and your calling, or when you've been operating in compulsion mode for so long that you've lost touch with the call entirely.

Here's what's crucial to understand: You can experience one type of fatigue without the others, or you can experience all three simultaneously. And they feed each other. Emotional exhaustion makes it harder to pray. Spiritual dryness makes you more emotionally vulnerable. Vocational doubt makes everything feel pointless.

Which brings us to the lie that keeps us stuck.

The Lie That Keeps Us Sick

"If I just try harder, I can do more."

This lie is so pervasive in helping professions that we barely recognize it as a lie. It sounds like commitment, dedication, faithfulness. It sounds like what Jesus would do.

But it's not.

The "try harder" mentality is built on several false assumptions:

False assumption #1: My worth is tied to my productivity. If I'm tired, it means I'm not doing enough. If I'm struggling, it means I'm not trying hard enough. The answer is always more effort, more hours, more sacrifice.

False assumption #2: There's a threshold where I'll finally be enough. If I just push through this season, if I just get past this crisis, if I just help this many people, *then* I can rest. But that threshold never comes because there's always another need, another crisis, another person.

False assumption #3: Self-sacrifice is always virtuous. The more I give up for others, the more spiritual I am. Rest is selfish. Boundaries are unloving. If I'm not exhausted, I'm not really serving.

False assumption #4: I'm indispensable. If I don't do it, it won't get done. If I don't show up, people will suffer. The weight of the world is on my shoulders, and I can't put it down.

These assumptions create a vicious cycle: We work until we're exhausted. When we're exhausted, we feel like we're failing. When we feel like we're failing, we try harder. When we try harder, we become more exhausted. And round and round we go, spiraling toward burnout while believing we're being faithful.

But here's the truth that breaks the cycle: **Trying harder when you're running on empty isn't faithfulness—it's pride disguised as service.**

It's pride because it assumes you're more essential than you are. It's pride because it refuses to acknowledge your limitations. It's pride because it suggests you can do in your own strength what only God can do in His.

Real faithfulness isn't about doing more. It's about doing what God is asking you to do, from a place of connection with Him, within the limits of your humanity.

And Jesus showed us exactly what that looks like.

Jesus' Rhythm: The Pattern We Ignore

We love to talk about Jesus' ministry. We preach about His compassion, His miracles, His willingness to engage with the outcasts and the hurting. We hold Him up as the model servant.

But we rarely talk about His rhythm.

Luke gives us a glimpse of it: "But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray" (Luke 5:15-16).

Read that again, slowly. The more people needed Him, the more intentionally He withdrew.

This wasn't Jesus being irresponsible or unavailable. This was Jesus modeling sustainable ministry. He had a pattern:

Ministry → Engagement with people's needs, teaching, healing, serving

Withdrawal → Physical separation from the crowds and the demands

Prayer → Reconnection with the Father, realignment with His will

Return → Re-engagement from a place of fullness rather than depletion

Notice what Jesus didn't do:

- He didn't heal everyone who needed healing
- He didn't stay available 24/7
- He didn't let urgency dictate His schedule
- He didn't sacrifice connection with the Father to meet human needs

In fact, there's a remarkable moment in Mark's gospel where Jesus is asleep in a boat during a storm. The disciples wake Him in a panic, and His response isn't frantic action—it's calm authority (Mark 4:35-41). He was so secure in His identity and His Father's purposes that He could sleep through a crisis.

Can you sleep through a crisis? Or do you lie awake rehearsing all the ways you might have helped, should have helped, could have helped?

Jesus also said something that should revolutionize how we think about work and rest: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Wait. Jesus' yoke is easy? His burden is light?

If that doesn't describe your experience of ministry, something is wrong. And it's not the ministry—it's the way you're carrying it.

Jesus isn't inviting us to a life of crushing responsibility where we bear the weight of everyone's problems. He's inviting us to walk alongside Him, yoked with Him, where He bears the weight and we simply move in rhythm with Him.

The heavy burdens we carry? Most of them were never ours to pick up in the first place.

Where Is Your Soul Today?

We can talk theoretically about burnout and fatigue, but at some point, we need to get honest about where we actually are. So let's do that now.

Below is an inventory—not to shame you, but to create awareness. You can't address what you won't acknowledge. Read through these questions slowly, honestly, without judgment. You might want to journal your responses or simply notice what reactions arise in you.

Emotional Inventory

1. When I think about my work this week, I feel:
 - Energized and engaged
 - Neutral, just doing my job
 - Drained and overwhelmed
 - Numb and detached
2. When someone shares their pain with me, I notice:
 - I genuinely feel for them and it motivates me to help
 - I care, but I'm having to work harder to access empathy
 - I feel mostly numb or irritated
 - I absorb their emotions and can't shake them off later
3. At the end of a workday, I:
 - Feel tired but satisfied
 - Feel depleted but able to recover with rest
 - Feel completely empty with nothing left for myself or my family
 - Feel angry or resentful about how much others take from me

4. My emotional volatility lately is:

- Stable—I feel like myself
- Slightly heightened—I'm more reactive than usual
- Unpredictable—I swing between numbness and overwhelming emotion
- Out of control—I don't recognize myself emotionally

Spiritual Inventory

5. My prayer life right now is:

- Life-giving and intimate
- Consistent but somewhat mechanical
- Sporadic and obligatory
- Virtually non-existent

6. When I read Scripture, I:

- Encounter God and feel spiritually nourished
- Get information but little transformation
- Feel like I'm reading someone else's mail
- Can barely get myself to open the Bible

7. My sense of God's presence is:

- Strong and sustaining
- Present but distant
- Faint or intermittent
- Absent—I feel spiritually alone

8. I would describe my current relationship with God as:

- Intimate and growing
- Stable but not deepening
- Strained and confusing
- Disconnected and empty

Vocational Inventory

9. When I think about my work tomorrow, I feel:

- Anticipation and purpose
- Neutral readiness
- Mild dread
- Deep dread or desire to escape

10. The meaningfulness of my work feels:

- Clear and compelling
- Mostly clear with occasional doubts
- Unclear more often than not
- Completely lost—I don't know why I'm doing this

11. I fantasize about leaving this profession:

- Rarely or never
- Occasionally when things are particularly hard
- Frequently—at least weekly
- Constantly—it's become an escape mechanism

12. My sense of competence in my work is:

- Solid—I know I'm good at this
- Mostly confident with normal insecurities

- Shaky—I often doubt my abilities
- Gone—I feel like an imposter just getting by

Physical and Relational Inventory

13. My sleep is:
- Restful and adequate
 - Decent but not quite enough
 - Interrupted or insufficient
 - Deeply disrupted—insomnia, nightmares, or excessive sleeping
14. My physical health lately is:
- Good—I'm taking care of myself
 - Okay but neglected in some areas
 - Poor—stress is manifesting in physical symptoms
 - Alarming—I'm dealing with significant health issues related to stress
15. My closest relationships are:
- Thriving and supportive
 - Stable but not as nourished as I'd like
 - Strained—I'm irritable, withdrawn, or emotionally unavailable
 - Suffering—my exhaustion is damaging the relationships I care about most

What Your Answers Reveal

There's no scoring system here because this isn't about passing or failing. It's about awareness.

But here are some general observations:

If most of your answers fell in the first category, you're likely in a healthy place. Stay vigilant, maintain your rhythms, and don't let culture or guilt pull you out of this space.

If most of your answers fell in the second category, you're in the "watch zone." Things are okay, but trending toward depletion. This is the time to make adjustments before you slide further.

If most of your answers fell in the third category, you're in burnout territory. You need intervention, not just a vacation. This requires addressing not just your schedule but the beliefs and patterns beneath it.

If most of your answers fell in the fourth category, you're in crisis. Please hear me: You need help. Professional help. Whether that's a therapist, a spiritual director, a sabbatical, or all of the above—you cannot push through this alone.

The Invitation to Honesty

The hardest part of addressing burnout, compassion fatigue, and soul exhaustion isn't figuring out what to do. It's admitting that we're there in the first place.

We're helpers. We're the ones who have it together. We're the ones people come to when they're falling apart. How can we admit that we're the ones who are falling apart now?

But here's what I've learned: God can't heal what we won't acknowledge. And we can't receive help if we keep pretending we don't need it.

The weary servant isn't a failure. The weary servant is a human being who's been carrying too much for too long without the support and rhythms necessary to sustain it.

Jesus' invitation to you—right now, in whatever state you find yourself—is the same invitation He extended to the crowds following Him around Galilee:

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Not "work harder and prove you're worthy of rest."

Not "finish everything on your list and then you can rest."

Not "rest is for people who aren't really committed."

Just: Come. And I will give you rest.

The question is: Will you come?

Will you admit you're tired?

Will you acknowledge you can't keep going like this?

Will you let yourself be the one who needs help instead of always being the helper?

The rest of this book is about how to move from exhaustion back to wholeness. But it all begins here—with the honest acknowledgment of where you are and the humble willingness to receive what only God can give.

You are weary. It's okay to say it out loud.

And Jesus is saying to you what He's always said to weary servants:

"I see you. I know you're tired. And I have rest for your soul—if you'll come to me for it instead of trying to find it in your own strength."

Pause and Reflect:

Before moving on, sit with these questions:

1. Which type of fatigue—emotional, spiritual, or vocational—resonates most with where you are right now?
2. What would it mean for you to actually "come to Jesus" for rest rather than just working harder?
3. What are you afraid will happen if you admit you're exhausted and can't keep going at this pace?
4. Looking at Jesus' rhythm of ministry-withdrawal-prayer-return, which part of that rhythm is most absent in your life right now?

Don't rush toward solutions yet. Just stay here in the awareness. Healing begins with honesty.

Chapter 3

When Helping Becomes Hurting: The Snare of Co-dependent Ministry

She was my most successful client. At least, that's what I told myself.

When Sarah first came to see me, she was in crisis—severe depression, struggling marriage, barely functional. Over the following months, I watched her transform. She started sleeping again. Her marriage stabilized. She found hope. And week after week, she told me I was the only person who really understood her, the only one who could help.

I felt like I was doing exactly what I was called to do.

Then she called me on Christmas Eve. Then again on New Year's Day. Then on my birthday. Each time, it was an emergency. Each time, I answered. Because that's what good therapists do, right? We show up. We're available. We save people.

It took me embarrassingly long to realize that I wasn't helping Sarah get better. I was helping her stay dependent on me. And I was doing it because somewhere deep inside, I needed her to need me.

The hardest truth I've had to face in my years as a helper is this: Sometimes the person most harmed by my helping isn't the person I'm trying to help—it's both of us. Because when helping becomes hurting, everybody loses.

The Savior Complex: Playing a Role That's Already Filled

There's only one Savior, and you're not Him.

This should be obvious. If you're a Christian in a helping profession, you'd probably affirm this truth without hesitation. Jesus is the Savior. Not you. Got it.

But here's what happens: We start out genuinely wanting to help people encounter Jesus, to facilitate healing, to participate in God's redemptive work. But gradually, imperceptibly, we slip into believing that we're not just participating in the healing—we're essential to it. That without us, this person

won't make it. That we're not pointing them to the Savior; we're being their savior.

The Savior Complex has several telltale signs:

You believe you can see what others cannot. You're convinced you understand this person's problems better than they do, better than their family does, maybe even better than God does. You have special insight, and if they would just listen to you, everything would be fine.

You take responsibility for their choices. When they make poor decisions, you feel like you failed. When they relapse, backslide, or return to destructive patterns, you lie awake wondering what you did wrong, what you could have said differently, how you could have prevented it.

You can't celebrate their progress without you. If they start getting better because of something else—another counselor, a medication change, a new friendship, answered prayer—you feel threatened rather than grateful. Their healing is supposed to come through you.

You keep them dependent rather than empowering their agency.

Consciously or unconsciously, you subtly communicate that they need you. You're available at all hours. You don't challenge them to develop their own coping skills. You rescue them from consequences instead of letting them learn from natural outcomes.

You derive your sense of worth from their transformation. Their success is your success. Their failure is your failure. You need them to get better so you can feel good about yourself.

This is the Savior Complex—the belief that you can do for people what only Christ can do. And it's one of the most destructive patterns in helping professions because it masquerades as love.

But it's not love. It's enmeshment. It's codependency. And it hurts everyone involved.

Here's the brutal truth: When you operate from a Savior Complex, you're not just overstepping your role—you're getting in God's way. You become an obstacle to the very healing you're trying to facilitate because you're standing between the person and Jesus, insisting they come through you to get to Him.

Over-Identifying: When Their Story Becomes Your Story

Rachel was a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. So was I.

When she walked into my office for the first time, I saw myself. Same age when the abuse started. Similar family dynamics. Even similar ways of coping—perfectionism on the outside, chaos on the inside.

I was determined to help her heal in ways I wish someone had helped me heal. I was going to be the therapist I needed but never had.

Except here's what happened: I stopped seeing Rachel. I started seeing my younger self. Her triggers became my triggers. Her flashbacks stirred up memories I thought I'd processed. Her progress felt like my vindication. Her setbacks felt like my failure.

I had stopped being her therapist and become entangled in her story as if it were my own.

Over-identification happens when we lose the boundary between ourselves and the people we're helping. We project our experiences onto theirs. We assume we know what they're feeling because we've felt something similar. We become so emotionally enmeshed that we can't maintain the healthy distance necessary for effective helping.

The warning signs of over-identification include:

You think about them constantly. They invade your thoughts at all hours. You can't watch a movie or have a conversation without something reminding you of their situation.

You have strong emotional reactions that aren't proportional. When they share something difficult, you're the one falling apart. When they make

progress, you're elated far beyond what the situation warrants. Your emotional responses are about you, not them.

You share too much about your own story. Self-disclosure can be therapeutic in moderation, but you find yourself making the session about you—your experiences, your insights, your healing journey—instead of staying focused on them.

You have rescue fantasies. You imagine scenarios where you save them from their circumstances. Maybe you think about inviting them to live with you, or giving them money, or connecting them with your personal network in ways that go far beyond your professional role.

You feel personally wounded when they don't take your advice. It's not just disappointing when they make choices you warned against—it feels like rejection, like they're hurting you specifically by not listening.

Over-identification feels like empathy, but it's actually a failure of empathy. True empathy is the ability to feel *with* someone while maintaining enough separateness to be genuinely helpful. Over-identification is drowning in their pain while losing the capacity to help them find their way out.

I had to transfer Rachel to another therapist. Not because she was too difficult, but because I was too entangled. I couldn't help her until I dealt with my own unhealed wounds that her story was exposing. She deserved a therapist who could be present to *her* story, not someone using her healing to heal themselves.

The Subtle Pride of Being Indispensable

This is the part that's hardest to admit. The part that feels almost shameful to say out loud.

But somewhere inside, we believe they need us to get better.

Not just that we're helpful. Not just that we're playing an important role. But that we're essential. That without us, they won't make it. That their healing depends on our involvement.

It sounds humble: "I'm just trying to be there for them." But beneath that humility is an arrogance we don't want to acknowledge: the belief that we're indispensable.

This subtle pride shows up in different ways:

We feel threatened when they connect with others. If they mention another counselor, pastor, or friend who's been helpful, we feel competitive rather than grateful. We want to be their primary support.

We keep information to ourselves. We don't refer them to other resources or specialists who might actually serve them better because we want to be the one who helps them through this.

We're secretly pleased when they tell us we're the only one who understands them. We know this kind of statement is a red flag—it indicates they're idealizing us, which sets us both up for disappointment. But it feels so good to be seen as special, necessary, irreplaceable.

We make ourselves overly available. We give them our personal cell number. We respond to texts at midnight. We squeeze them in for emergency sessions. And while we frame this as sacrificial service, it's actually our need to be needed in disguise.

We're devastated when they terminate or move on. Instead of celebrating that they've grown enough to continue their journey without us, we feel abandoned, unappreciated, or worse—like failures.

Listen to how John the Baptist described his relationship to Jesus: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

John understood something essential: his role was to point people to Jesus, not to himself. And when people started following Jesus instead of him, John celebrated. He didn't feel threatened. He didn't compete. He didn't try to maintain his position of influence.

He decreased so Jesus could increase.

Can you say the same about your ministry? Can you genuinely celebrate when the people you're helping start relying more on God and less on you? Or does their growing independence feel like a threat to your identity?

The subtle pride of believing "they need me" is dangerous because it's the opposite of what we're called to do. We're supposed to be decreasing—helping people become less dependent on us and more dependent on God. But when our identity is wrapped up in being needed, we sabotage the very growth we claim to be facilitating.

Jesus' Radical Detachment

If anyone had the right to a Savior Complex, it was the actual Savior.

But watch how Jesus operated:

He healed people and then left. He didn't follow up. He didn't establish ongoing counseling relationships. He didn't make them dependent on His presence for their continued wholeness. He healed them and moved on.

He let people walk away. When the rich young ruler couldn't accept Jesus' teaching and left, Jesus didn't chase him. He didn't soften His message to make it more palatable. He let him go (Mark 10:17-22).

He sent people back to their communities. After healing the demoniac, the man wanted to follow Jesus. But Jesus said no—go back home and tell people what God has done for you (Mark 5:18-20). Jesus didn't need followers. He wanted witnesses.

He refused to take credit. When people tried to make Him king after He fed the 5,000, He withdrew (John 6:15). He wasn't interested in the kind of power that comes from people's dependency.

He entrusted His work to imperfect people. He sent out the disciples to heal and teach long before they were ready. Peter would deny Him. Thomas would doubt. They'd all scatter at His crucifixion. But Jesus didn't wait until they were perfect or even particularly reliable. He trusted the Father's work in them more than He trusted His own influence over them.

He knew when to say no. In Luke 4, Jesus has been healing people in Capernaum. The next morning, the crowds come looking for more healing. They want Him to stay. They need Him. But Jesus says, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose" (Luke 4:43). He didn't let their needs dictate His calling.

This is what healthy detachment looks like—caring deeply without being enmeshed, helping powerfully without creating dependency, serving faithfully without needing the outcome to validate your worth.

Jesus could do this because He knew who He was. He didn't need people to need Him. His identity wasn't tied to His ministry results. He was secure in the Father's love whether the crowds followed Him or abandoned Him, whether people were healed or not, whether His disciples got it or completely missed the point.

He was the Son of God before He ever healed a single person. And He would still be the Son of God even if every person He helped had rejected Him.

Can you say the same? Are you beloved before you are useful? Or does your sense of worth rise and fall with your ministry effectiveness?

Bearing Burdens Without Carrying Loads

Paul gives us a paradox in Galatians that perfectly captures the tension of healthy helping:

"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ... For each will have to bear his own load" (Galatians 6:2, 5).

Wait. Which is it? Do we bear each other's burdens, or does everyone bear their own load?

The answer is yes.

The Greek words are different. "Burden" (*baros*) refers to an overwhelming weight that crushes—something too heavy for one person to carry alone.

"Load" (*phortion*) refers to the normal responsibilities of life—the weight everyone is meant to carry for themselves.

So we're called to help people with their *baros*—the crushing weights that exceed their capacity—while still allowing them to carry their own *phortion*—the normal responsibilities that are part of growth and maturity.

The problem is that codependent helpers can't tell the difference. We try to carry everyone's loads, including the ones they're meant to carry themselves. And in doing so, we don't help them—we infantilize them. We rob them of the dignity of their own agency. We communicate that we don't believe they're capable of handling their own lives.

Healthy helping means:

- Coming alongside someone in crisis (bearing their burden)
- But not making their crisis your permanent responsibility
- Supporting someone through consequences
- But not rescuing them from consequences they need to experience
- Offering resources, guidance, and presence
- But ultimately trusting them to make their own choices

This is the balance Jesus modeled. He helped people, but He didn't hover. He healed people, but He didn't control them. He loved people, but He didn't need them to validate Him.

Healing Our Need to Be Needed

So how do we heal from codependent ministry? How do we move from helping that hurts to helping that truly liberates?

It starts with getting brutally honest about what we're getting out of being needed.

Face the Payoff

Codependency persists because it serves us in some way. Yes, it's exhausting and ultimately destructive, but it's also giving us something we want. Until we face what that is, we won't change.

Ask yourself:

- What do I get from being the hero in people's stories?
- How does being needed protect me from facing my own issues?
- What am I afraid would happen if people didn't need me anymore?
- What would I have to feel or deal with if I couldn't stay busy fixing others?

For me, being needed meant I didn't have to feel how lonely I was. If I was constantly tending to others' crises, I didn't have to face the emptiness in my own life. Being indispensable was how I avoided feeling invisible.

What's the payoff for you?

Acknowledge the Wound Beneath the Pattern

Codependency almost always grows out of our own story. Maybe you learned early that your worth came from taking care of others. Maybe love was conditional in your family—you had to earn it by being helpful, accommodating, perfect. Maybe you experienced powerlessness and now you're trying to heal that by being the powerful one in relationships.

Codependent ministry is often our attempt to heal our own wounds by reenacting them with different outcomes. We try to save others in ways we wish someone had saved us. We try to be for them what no one was for us.

But here's the hard truth: You can't heal your childhood wound by being the perfect helper for someone else. You can only heal your wound by bringing it to Jesus and letting Him meet you in it.

Grieve the Loss of Your Identity

If being needed has been central to your identity, letting that go will feel like dying. Because in a sense, it is. It's the death of the false self you've built around being indispensable.

You might need to grieve:

- The loss of feeling important
- The loss of the rush that comes from being someone's hero
- The loss of the distraction that comes from focusing on others' problems
- The loss of the identity you've built around being "the helper"

This grief is real and it's important. Don't rush through it. Sit with the loss. Let yourself feel the disorientation of not knowing who you are if you're not constantly needed.

On the other side of that grief is something better: your true identity as the Beloved. But you can't skip the grief to get there.

Establish Boundaries You've Been Avoiding

Healing codependency requires practical changes, not just internal shifts. You need to establish boundaries that feel uncomfortable, maybe even cruel. But they're not cruel—they're necessary.

This might mean:

- Not giving out your personal cell number
- Establishing office hours and sticking to them
- Referring clients/congregants to others when you're at capacity
- Ending relationships that are clearly unhealthy for both parties
- Saying "no" to demands for your time, even when people are genuinely in need

At first, these boundaries will make you feel guilty, selfish, uncaring. That's because codependency has trained you to believe that love means having no limits. But that's not love—that's enmeshment.

Real love has boundaries. Real love empowers rather than enables. Real love trusts people to carry their own loads while offering support with their burdens.

Develop Your Own Life

One of the clearest signs of codependency is when your entire life revolves around your role as a helper. You have no hobbies unrelated to your work. No friendships where you're not in a caretaking role. No activities that are just for you, just for enjoyment.

Part of healing is developing a life outside of being needed. This feels indulgent at first—maybe even impossible. But it's essential.

What would you do if you couldn't do your job? Who would you be if no one needed your help? What brings you joy that has nothing to do with fixing, saving, or healing anyone?

Find those things. Do those things. Become a person who exists fully even when you're not helping anyone.

Return to Your First Love

Ultimately, healing from codependency is about returning to the truth that you are Beloved before you are useful.

Jesus asked Peter this question three times: "Do you love me?" (John 21:15-17). Each time Peter affirmed his love, Jesus gave him a commission: "Feed my sheep."

But notice the order: Love first, then service. Relationship before responsibility. Being with Jesus before doing for Jesus.

We've reversed this. We think if we serve well enough, we'll earn His love. If we help enough people, we'll finally feel worthy. If we sacrifice enough, we'll prove we're valuable.

But Jesus doesn't need your service to love you. He loved you before you ever helped anyone. He'll love you if you never help another soul. Your ministry doesn't make you worthy—His grace does.

When you really believe that—when it drops from your head to your heart—you'll be free to help people without needing them to need you. You'll be free to care without being enmeshed. You'll be free to decrease so He can increase.

The Liberation of "Not Me, But Christ"

There's a moment in recovery from codependency that feels like death but is actually resurrection.

It's the moment when you realize: They don't need me. They need God. And I'm just the temporary vessel through which God is working. I'm not essential. I'm not irreplaceable. I'm simply available.

For me, that moment came with a client I'd been seeing for years. She'd become dependent on me in ways that weren't healthy for either of us. And one day, I realized: I have to fire her. Not because she's difficult, but because I'm keeping her from growing by allowing her to depend on me instead of learning to depend on God.

It was one of the hardest conversations I've ever had. She cried. She felt abandoned. She accused me of not caring.

And I had to sit with the discomfort of knowing that letting go was the most loving thing I could do, even though it didn't feel loving in the moment.

Six months later, she called to thank me. Ending our professional relationship had forced her to develop the coping skills she'd been avoiding. She'd found a community of support. She'd learned to pray in ways she never had before. She was healthier without me than she'd ever been with me.

I wasn't the hero of her story after all. God was. I was just a supporting character who needed to exit the stage so the real Healer could do His work.

That's the liberation: Realizing that the pressure is off. The outcome doesn't rest on you. You're not the Savior. You're just a witness to what the Savior is doing.

And that—paradoxically—is when you become most useful. Not when you need to be needed, but when you're free to serve without attachment to the outcome.

Not when you're trying to save people, but when you're simply pointing them to the One who already did.

Pause and Reflect:

These questions will likely surface discomfort. Stay with them anyway.

1. As you read this chapter, what defensive reactions came up? What felt threatening or offensive? Often our defensiveness points to the truth we most need to hear.
2. Which person in your life are you most enmeshed with right now? What would it mean to step back and trust God with their outcome?
3. Complete this sentence honestly: "If people didn't need me, I would feel..."
4. What would have to change in your life and work if you truly believed that God doesn't need your help—He's simply inviting you to participate in what He's already doing?

The answers to these questions are the beginning of freedom. Don't rush past them.

Chapter 4

Holy Boundaries: Love That is Kind, Truthful, and Limited

The email arrived at 11:47 PM on a Saturday.

"Pastor, I really need to talk to you. Can we meet tomorrow after the service? It's urgent."

I was already exhausted. Sunday was a full day—three services, a board meeting, a hospital visit I'd promised to make. My wife and I had barely seen each other all week. But this person needed me. And isn't that what pastors do? Show up when people need them?

So I wrote back: "Of course. I'll make time."

By the time I crawled into bed that night, my wife was already asleep. Or pretending to be. I couldn't tell anymore.

The next day, after the last service, I met with the person who'd emailed. They wanted to talk about whether they should take a new job. It was an important decision, certainly. But urgent? Not really. Could it have waited until my office hours on Tuesday? Absolutely.

But I'd said yes. Because I always said yes.

That evening, my wife finally broke her silence. "I'm tired of competing with your church for your attention. You have time for everyone except the people who actually live in your house."

She was right. And I knew it. But I didn't know how to change it.

Because deep down, I believed that boundaries were selfish. That saying "no" meant I didn't really care. That Jesus would have made time for that late-night email, so who was I to say I couldn't?

It took me years to learn what I wish someone had told me on day one of ministry: **Boundaries aren't a failure of love. They're a prerequisite for it.**

Jesus and the Ministry of "No"

We love to talk about Jesus' availability. How He had compassion on the crowds. How He welcomed the children. How He ate with sinners and touched lepers.

But we rarely talk about how often Jesus said no.

Consider this moment in Mark's gospel:

"And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, 'Everyone is looking for you.' And he said to them, 'Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out'" (Mark 1:35-38).

Read that again carefully. Everyone was looking for Him. Not just a few people—everyone. The crowds had real needs. They wanted healing, teaching, hope. And Jesus' disciples had already found Him to relay the urgency of the situation.

But Jesus said no.

Not because He didn't care. Not because He was burned out or overwhelmed. But because He was clear about His calling, and responding to that crowd wasn't part of it at that moment.

He had boundaries. And His boundaries were holy.

Jesus' Pattern of Boundary-Setting

Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus consistently maintaining limits:

He withdrew from crowds regularly (Luke 5:15-16, Matthew 14:23). Even when people were desperate to get to Him, He prioritized time alone with the Father.

He didn't heal everyone (John 5:1-9). At the pool of Bethesda, there were many sick people. Jesus healed one man and left. He didn't feel obligated to heal them all.

He refused to be manipulated (Luke 12:13-14). When someone tried to pull Him into a family dispute about inheritance, Jesus declined. "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?"

He said no to His own family (Mark 3:31-35). When His mother and brothers came looking for Him during His teaching, He didn't stop everything to attend to them. He had work to do.

He let people walk away (John 6:66-67). After a hard teaching, many disciples left. Jesus didn't chase them or soften His message to keep them. He simply asked the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?"

He protected His disciples' rest (Mark 6:31). When the apostles returned from ministry, exhausted and overwhelmed by crowds, Jesus said, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while."

He refused the crowd's agenda (John 6:15). When people tried to make Him king after He fed the 5,000, He withdrew. He wouldn't let their expectations dictate His mission.

This is our model. Jesus—the most loving, compassionate, others-centered person who ever lived—had clear boundaries. He said no with regularity and without guilt.

If Jesus needed boundaries, what makes us think we don't?

The Lie That Boundaries Are Selfish

But here's where we get stuck: We've been taught that boundaries are unspiritual. That truly loving people means we're available always, for everything, no matter the cost to ourselves.

This lie shows up in different forms:

"If I were really Christ-like, I'd never need to say no." But as we just saw, Jesus said no constantly. Boundaries aren't a failure to be like Christ—they're an imitation of Christ.

"My needs don't matter as much as others' needs." But Jesus didn't just command us to love our neighbor. He commanded us to love our neighbor *as ourselves*—implying that self-love is the baseline, not self-neglect.

"If I have boundaries, people will think I don't care." Some people will think that. But their opinion of you isn't your responsibility. Your responsibility is to be faithful to what God has called you to do, which requires protecting what God has entrusted to you—including your own soul.

"Real servants don't have limits." Except that's not true. Even Jesus operated within the limitations of human existence. He got tired. He needed food, sleep, prayer, solitude. He didn't try to be everywhere, do everything, or save everyone. He was faithful to His specific calling within His human limitations.

"Boundaries are about me; ministry is about others." This is the most insidious lie because it sounds so spiritual. But boundaries aren't selfish—they're stewardship. You can't give what you don't have. You can't love from an empty well. Boundaries ensure you have something to give.

Why Guilt Arises When We Set Limits

Even when we intellectually understand that boundaries are healthy, we often feel crushing guilt when we actually enforce them.

Why?

Old family scripts. Many of us grew up in families where our worth was tied to our usefulness. Setting boundaries was labeled as selfish, unloving, or rebellious. Those early messages are deeply wired, and they resurface every time we try to say no.

Distorted theology. We've heard sermons about dying to self, taking up our cross, laying down our lives. And while all of that is true, we've interpreted it to mean we should have no needs, no limits, no humanity. But dying to self doesn't mean destroying yourself—it means surrendering your will to God's, which includes stewarding your life well.

Fear of disappointing people. We're people-pleasers at heart. The thought of someone being upset with us, thinking less of us, or feeling let down by us is almost unbearable. So we say yes even when we should say no, just to avoid the discomfort of potential conflict.

Misplaced responsibility. We feel guilty because we've taken responsibility for things that aren't ours to carry. We believe that if we don't help, they won't be okay. But their well-being isn't ultimately our responsibility—it's God's.

The manipulation of others. Let's be honest: some people push against our boundaries because it serves them to keep us without limits. They've learned that if they express disappointment, hurt, or anger, we'll cave. And they use that leverage—consciously or unconsciously—to keep us available on their terms.

Here's what you need to hear: **Guilt is not always an accurate indicator of wrongdoing.** Sometimes guilt is your conscience telling you that you've sinned. But sometimes guilt is just the discomfort of growth, of doing something different, of disappointing people who've gotten used to you having no boundaries.

Learning to distinguish between true conviction and false guilt is essential for healthy boundary-setting.

"As Yourself": The Command We Ignore

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39).

We've heard this so many times that we miss what it actually says. Jesus isn't commanding us to love our neighbor *instead* of ourselves. He's commanding us to love our neighbor *as* ourselves—meaning, with the same attention, care, and concern we have for our own well-being.

This assumes we love ourselves. It assumes we care for our own needs. It assumes we're not destroying ourselves in the name of loving others.

Self-care isn't a distraction from the second greatest commandment—it's embedded within it.

Think about it practically. If you're physically exhausted, you can't give your best to the people you're serving. If you're emotionally depleted, you don't have the resources to be present to someone else's pain. If you're spiritually dry, you can't point people to the living water because you've forgotten where to find it yourself.

This isn't selfish—it's sustainable.

The Proverbs writer understood this: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (Proverbs 4:23). Guarding your heart isn't about being self-protective or closed off. It's about stewardship. Your heart is the wellspring of everything you have to offer. If you don't protect it, it will run dry. And then you'll have nothing left to give.

What Self-Love Actually Means

Self-love isn't narcissism. It's not self-absorption or indulgence. It's treating yourself with the same compassion, patience, and care you'd extend to someone you love.

It means:

- Getting adequate sleep because your body is a gift from God that needs rest
- Eating nourishing food because you can't pour from an empty cup
- Taking time for prayer and solitude because your soul needs tending
- Engaging in activities that bring you joy because delight is part of being human
- Saying no when you're at capacity because overextension helps no one
- Processing your own pain instead of medicating it by focusing on others' pain
- Cultivating friendships where you can be known, not just needed
- Honoring the limitations of your humanity instead of trying to be God

When you love yourself well, you're more capable of loving others well. When you neglect yourself in the name of ministry, you end up giving from depletion—which inevitably leads to resentment, burnout, and ineffective service.

You cannot sustainably give what you do not have.

Boundaries in Practice: What Does This Actually Look Like?

Theory is good. But most of us don't struggle with the concept of boundaries—we struggle with the execution. How do you actually set boundaries in real-life ministry situations without feeling like a terrible person?

Let me give you some practical guidance.

Boundary #1: Protecting Your Schedule

Jesus had a rhythm: ministry, withdrawal, prayer, return. You need a rhythm too. And that means your schedule needs actual boundaries, not just wishful thinking.

What this looks like:

- Establish office hours and communicate them clearly
- Don't check work email after a certain time
- Take a full day off each week—and protect it as sacred
- Build margin into your calendar instead of scheduling back-to-back obligations
- Learn to say, "I'm not available then, but I could meet during my office hours on Tuesday"

Sample script: "I care about what you're going through, and I want to give you my full attention. I'm not available tonight, but I have office hours on Tuesday at 2 PM. Would that work for you?"

Boundary #2: Limiting Accessibility

You don't have to be available 24/7. Even emergency room doctors have shifts that end. Even on-call chaplains rotate coverage.

What this looks like:

- Don't give out your personal cell number to everyone
- Turn off notifications during family time or rest periods
- Establish an emergency protocol so people know when it's appropriate to reach you outside office hours
- Have a trusted colleague or system in place for true emergencies when you're unavailable

Sample script: "I want to be available for true emergencies. If there's a crisis—someone is in immediate danger, a death, or a hospital situation—you can reach me at this number. For other concerns, I'm available during my office hours, and I promise I'll give you my full attention then."

Boundary #3: Saying No to Requests

You can't do everything. You weren't designed to. Every yes to something is a no to something else—often to your own well-being or to the people closest to you.

What this looks like:

- Before automatically saying yes, ask yourself: Is this mine to carry? Is this my calling? Do I have capacity?
- Practice saying, "Let me check my schedule and get back to you" instead of immediately agreeing
- Offer alternatives when you need to decline: "I can't do that, but have you considered..."
- Remember that "no" is a complete sentence—you don't owe elaborate explanations

Sample scripts:

- "I appreciate you thinking of me, but I don't have capacity for that right now."
- "That sounds important, but it's not something I'm able to take on. Have you talked to [colleague/other resource]?"
- "I need to decline so I can give my best to the commitments I've already made."
- "No, I'm not able to do that."

Boundary #4: Ending Conversations

Some people will talk forever if you let them. Learning to graciously end conversations is a necessary skill.

What this looks like:

- Set time parameters at the beginning: "I have 30 minutes—let's make the most of it"
- Give warning as you approach the end: "We have about five minutes left. What's most important to address before we wrap up?"
- Stand up, move toward the door, or give other physical cues that the conversation is ending
- Don't apologize excessively for having limits

Sample scripts:

- "I want to give this the attention it deserves, but I have another commitment in a few minutes. Can we schedule a time to continue this conversation?"
- "I'm going to need to end our conversation here. Let's find a time to follow up."
- "I'm glad we got to talk. I need to move to my next appointment, but feel free to schedule another time if you need more."

Boundary #5: Deflecting Manipulation

Some people won't respect your boundaries. They'll push back, express hurt, or try to make you feel guilty for having limits. This is manipulation, and you don't have to give in to it.

What this looks like:

- Recognize guilt trips for what they are
- Don't defend, explain, or justify your boundaries excessively
- Stay calm and repeat your boundary without budging
- Be willing to let people be disappointed

Sample scripts when people push back:

- Person: "But I really need you." You: "I understand this is hard, but I'm not available. Here's another resource..."
- Person: "I thought you cared about people." You: "I do care. And part of caring well is maintaining healthy limits."
- Person: "You've always made time before." You: "I have, and I've learned I need to be more careful with my boundaries for my own health. I'm still here for you within my office hours."
- Person: "This can't wait." You: "If this is a true emergency, here's who to contact. Otherwise, I'm available on Tuesday."

Boundary #6: Protecting Personal Information

You don't owe people unlimited access to your personal life, your location, or your private time.

What this looks like:

- You don't have to share your home address with everyone
- You don't have to be friends with clients/congregants on personal social media

- You don't have to explain your personal schedule or justify your time off
- You can decline social invitations without elaborate explanations

Sample scripts:

- "I keep my personal social media separate from my professional life, but I'd be happy to connect on [professional platform]."
- "I don't typically share my home address, but we can meet at my office."
- "I appreciate the invitation, but I need to keep my personal time separate from work."

Boundary #7: Establishing Professional Distance

There's a difference between caring for people and becoming enmeshed with them. Professional boundaries keep relationships healthy.

What this looks like:

- You don't meet with clients/counselees in your home
- You maintain appropriate physical boundaries—no prolonged hugging, no meeting in isolated locations
- You don't become friends with people you're helping (at least not during the helping relationship)
- You don't share your own struggles in ways that make them feel responsible for you

Sample script: "I care about you and I want to support you well. Part of that means maintaining appropriate professional boundaries so I can be most helpful. That's why I [don't share personal contact info / meet only in the office / etc.]."

Let Your "Yes" Be Yes and Your "No" Be No

Jesus said something fascinating about speech: "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Matthew 5:37).

We often interpret this as being about oath-taking, but there's a broader principle here about integrity and clarity. Your yes should mean yes. Your no should mean no. You shouldn't need to justify, defend, or over-explain your boundaries.

But those of us without healthy boundaries do the opposite:

- We say "yes" when we mean "no" (and then resent it)
- We say "maybe" when we mean "no" (trying to avoid confrontation)
- We say "no" but then immediately backtrack with excuses and apologies
- We give elaborate explanations for our boundaries, as if we need to earn the right to have them

Here's the truth: **You don't need a good enough reason to say no. You need only to be at your limit.**

"No" doesn't require justification. It's a complete sentence.

Of course, you can offer brief explanations out of kindness: "I'm not available then" or "I don't have capacity for that right now." But you don't owe people elaborate justifications for your boundaries.

The more you defend your boundaries, the more you communicate that they're negotiable. They're not.

When People React Badly

Let's be realistic: Some people won't like your boundaries. They'll be disappointed, frustrated, even angry. They may accuse you of not caring, of being unavailable, of failing them.

This will be painful. Especially if you're wired to please people and avoid conflict.

But here's what you need to remember:

Their disappointment isn't your problem to fix. You can have compassion for their feelings without taking responsibility for them. They're allowed to be disappointed. You're allowed to have boundaries anyway.

You're not responsible for their expectations. If they've gotten used to you being available 24/7, that's not a covenant you made—it's a pattern they grew to expect. You're allowed to change unhealthy patterns.

Some relationships won't survive boundaries. And that's okay.

Relationships built on your lack of boundaries aren't healthy relationships. If someone only wants to be in relationship with you when you have no limits, that's not a relationship—it's exploitation.

Healthy people respect boundaries. When you set limits and someone responds with respect, gratitude, or understanding—that's a person who actually cares about you. When you set limits and someone responds with manipulation, guilt, or anger—that's a person who cares more about what you can do for them than who you are.

Your boundaries reveal the health of your relationships. That's information, not condemnation.

The Freedom of Limits

There's a paradox in boundary-setting that sounds counterintuitive until you experience it:

Limits create freedom.

When you have clear boundaries, you're free to give fully within those boundaries without resentment, without burnout, without the nagging sense that you should be doing more.

When you know you have protected time for rest, you can work wholeheartedly during work time. When you know you're not on call 24/7, you can be fully present during the hours you've committed. When you've established limits around what you will and won't do, you can engage in what you've said yes to without guilt about what you've said no to.

Boundaries don't diminish your ministry—they sustain it.

Jesus could be fully present to the people in front of Him because He wasn't trying to be present to everyone, everywhere, all the time. He could engage wholeheartedly in His Father's work because He was clear about what that work was and wasn't.

The same can be true for you.

When you establish holy boundaries—limits that honor God, protect what He's entrusted to you, and allow you to love from fullness rather than depletion—you'll discover something surprising:

You're more effective, not less. You're more loving, not less. You're more present, more engaged, more genuinely helpful—because you're operating from rest instead of exhaustion, from abundance instead of scarcity.

Boundaries aren't a failure of love. They're the structure that makes love sustainable.

Pause and Reflect:

It's time to get practical and personal. Consider these questions:

1. Which boundary is most difficult for you to set or maintain? Why do you think that is?
2. When you imagine saying no to someone's request, what do you fear will happen? How much of that fear is rooted in truth versus old scripts?
3. Think about Jesus' pattern of ministry-withdrawal-prayer-return. Which part of that rhythm is most absent in your life? What would need to change to establish it?
4. Write down three boundaries you know you need to establish. What's one small step you could take toward each one this week?

Remember: You don't have to fix everything at once. Start with one boundary. Practice it. Get comfortable with the discomfort. Then add another.

Holy boundaries aren't built in a day. But they are built—one "no" at a time.

Chapter 5

Serving Without Absorbing: Ministering From Overflow

I used to wear other people's pain like a second skin.

A client would tell me about her abusive childhood, and I'd leave the session carrying her trauma in my body. A congregant would share his anxiety about finances, and I'd lie awake that night worrying about his mortgage. A patient would describe her depression, and I'd walk through the next week under a cloud that wasn't even mine.

I thought this was empathy. I thought it meant I cared. I thought absorbing people's pain was the price of being a good helper.

Until the day I couldn't get out of bed.

Not because I was physically ill. Not because something terrible had happened in my own life. But because I was carrying so much weight that didn't belong to me that I could no longer bear the weight of my own existence.

I'd been to the emotional well once too often, and I'd finally found the bottom. There was nothing left. Not for the people who needed me. Not for the people who loved me. Not even for myself.

My supervisor said something that day that changed everything: "You're not helping them by drowning in their pain with them. You're just creating two people who need rescue instead of one."

She was right. I'd confused empathy with absorption. Presence with fusion. Caring deeply with carrying everything.

And I had to learn—slowly, painfully—the difference between serving people and becoming consumed by their suffering.

Empathy vs. Emotional Fusion: Two Very Different Things

Let's start by getting clear on terms, because the difference between empathy and emotional fusion is the difference between sustainable ministry and soul-destroying codependency.

Empathy: Standing Beside

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. It's standing beside someone in their pain and saying, "I see you. I'm here. You're not alone."

Healthy empathy has these characteristics:

Presence without possession. You're emotionally available to the person without taking ownership of their emotions. You feel *with* them, not *for* them.

Clarity about whose pain is whose. You can distinguish between their experience and your own. You're affected by their story, but you don't confuse it with your story.

The ability to metabolize emotion. You can hold space for difficult feelings—yours and theirs—without being overwhelmed by them. You have enough internal capacity to be present to pain without drowning in it.

Maintained perspective. Even when you're deeply moved by someone's suffering, you can still access the bigger picture—hope, possibility, God's faithfulness, the reality that this isn't the end of their story.

The freedom to step back. When the conversation ends, you can return to your own life. Their crisis doesn't become your crisis. Their anxiety doesn't become your anxiety. You carry compassion, but not their burden.

Think of empathy like being a midwife. You're present for the labor, you provide support and guidance, you witness the pain—but you're not the one giving birth. You can be fully engaged without believing the baby is yours to deliver.

Emotional Fusion: Drowning Together

Emotional fusion, on the other hand, is what happens when the boundaries between you and the other person dissolve. You don't just feel *with* them—you become fused with their emotional experience.

Emotional fusion looks like:

Taking on their emotions as your own. Their anxiety becomes your anxiety. Their depression seeps into your mood. Their trauma triggers your nervous system. You can't tell where they end and you begin.

Losing yourself in their story. You become so absorbed in their experience that you lose perspective. Their crisis is all you can think about. Their pain eclipses everything else, including your own needs and the needs of others in your life.

Carrying responsibility for their outcomes. You don't just care about whether they heal—you feel personally responsible for making it happen. If they don't improve, you experience it as your failure.

Inability to compartmentalize. When you leave the counseling session, the hospital room, or the coffee shop where you met, you can't leave their pain behind. It follows you home. It invades your sleep. It colors every other interaction.

Physical symptoms. Your body starts manifesting the stress you're absorbing—headaches, digestive issues, muscle tension, exhaustion, illness. You're carrying so much that isn't yours that your body is breaking down under the weight.

Emotional fusion is like jumping into the water to save someone who's drowning—and forgetting that you can't swim either. Now there are two people drowning instead of one, and neither of you is getting rescued.

Why We Confuse the Two

If emotional fusion is so destructive, why do we keep doing it?

Because **it feels like love.**

When you absorb someone's pain, it feels like you're really there for them. Like you care so much that you're willing to suffer with them. Like you're not one of those detached, clinical helpers who keeps people at arm's length.

And let's be honest—there's also something in it for us. When we fuse with people's pain:

- We feel needed, important, essential
- We avoid dealing with our own issues by focusing on theirs
- We get to be the hero in their story
- We reinforce our identity as someone who cares deeply

But here's the brutal truth: **Emotional fusion doesn't help them, and it destroys you.**

It doesn't help them because they need someone who can hold steady while they fall apart—not someone who falls apart with them. They need a grounded presence, not a fellow drowning victim.

And it destroys you because you were never designed to carry the emotional weight of everyone who shares their burden with you. You're human. Finite. Limited. And when you try to absorb what was meant to stay with them or be cast on God, you break.

Jesus: Present but Not Consumed

If anyone had reason to become emotionally fused with the suffering around Him, it was Jesus.

He saw lepers. He touched the bleeding woman. He stood at the grave of His friend Lazarus. He encountered demon-possessed men, desperate parents, hungry crowds, religious leaders plotting His death.

He was surrounded by pain—relentless, crushing, overwhelming pain.

And He felt it. We know this because Scripture tells us He was "moved with compassion" (Matthew 9:36). The Greek word, *splagchnizomai*, describes a gut-level response—He felt their suffering in His body.

But—and this is crucial—**He never became consumed by it.**

Jesus' Ministry Posture

Look at how Jesus engaged with people:

He was fully present. When the woman with the issue of blood touched Him, He stopped. In the middle of a crowd pressing in on every side, with an urgent request from a synagogue ruler, Jesus stopped and gave her His full attention (Mark 5:25-34). He didn't multitask through her healing. He was there, completely.

But He maintained separateness. After intense times of ministry, Jesus withdrew. "But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray" (Luke 5:16). He didn't carry the crowds home with Him. He didn't absorb their needs into His identity. He created space between Himself and the demands.

He sat down to teach. "Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them" (Matthew 5:1-2). Notice the posture—seated. Composed. Teaching from a place of rest, not frenzy.

He released outcomes to the Father. Jesus healed people and let them go. He didn't follow them around making sure they stayed healed. He didn't take personal responsibility for whether they chose to follow Him or walk away.

He knew His limits. "My Father is working until now, and I am working... The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:17, 19). Jesus operated within the limits of human incarnation. He wasn't everywhere. He didn't heal everyone. He did what the Father was doing—no more, no less.

He kept His peace. Even in crisis—storms, hostile crowds, impending crucifixion—Jesus maintained an internal stillness that baffled those around

Him. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (John 14:27). He could give peace because He possessed it, even in the midst of chaos.

This is the model. Jesus cared deeply without being consumed. He was moved by suffering without being controlled by it. He felt people's pain without absorbing it as His own.

And He did it by remaining anchored in His identity and His connection to the Father.

When you know who you are—Beloved, secure, held—you can be present to others' pain without needing to fix it, own it, or drown in it.

Leaving Burdens at the Feet of Christ

Peter wrote something that's both simple and revolutionary: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

All your anxiety. Not some. Not the acceptable amount. All of it.

But here's what we miss: This includes the anxiety that doesn't even belong to us—the worry we've absorbed from the people we're helping.

We need to learn to actively, intentionally, regularly leave burdens at the feet of Christ. Not just our burdens, but the ones we've picked up that were never ours to carry.

This isn't callousness. It's not detachment or indifference. It's trust. It's saying, "God, I can care about this person without carrying what only You can carry. I release them to You."

Why We Resist Releasing

If leaving burdens with Christ is the answer, why is it so hard?

We're afraid it means we don't care. We've equated carrying people's pain with loving them. If we release it, does that mean we're cold? Uncaring? Insufficiently compassionate?

We believe we're supposed to carry it. Our theology is confused. We think carrying what Christ carried means absorbing everyone's suffering. But Christ didn't just carry it—He *took it away*. Our job isn't to carry it alongside Him; it's to point people to the One who already carried it to the cross.

We get something out of carrying it. Remember the payoff conversation from Chapter 3? Carrying people's burdens makes us feel important, needed, essential. Releasing those burdens means releasing the identity we've built around being the one who carries them.

We don't trust God with the outcome. Deep down, we're afraid that if we stop carrying it, no one will. If we stop worrying about them, who will make sure they're okay? We don't really believe God cares as much as we do.

But here's the truth: **You cannot carry what Christ has already carried. You can only exhaust yourself trying.**

Practical Practices for Emotional Containment

Theology is essential, but we also need tangible practices—tools we can use in the moment when we feel ourselves absorbing pain that isn't ours.

Here are several practices that have proven effective for helpers who want to serve from overflow rather than depletion.

Practice 1: The Breath Prayer

A breath prayer is a short, simple prayer that coordinates with your breathing. It's a way to anchor yourself in God's presence when you feel emotionally overwhelmed.

How to use it:

- Breathe in: "Lord Jesus"
- Breathe out: "I release this to You"

Or:

- Breathe in: "I receive Your peace"

- Breathe out: "I release their burden"

Or:

- Breathe in: "You are God"
- Breathe out: "I am not"

When to use it:

- During a difficult counseling session when you feel yourself taking on their anxiety
- After someone shares something traumatic and you notice your body responding
- Before bed when you're replaying conversations and can't let go
- Any moment when you realize you're carrying what isn't yours

The beauty of breath prayers is that they're always available. You don't need special equipment, a quiet room, or dedicated time. You simply breathe and pray, reminding yourself of truth.

Practice 2: The Liturgical Release

For some, a more formal liturgy helps create emotional containment. This is a structured prayer you can pray at the end of each day or after particularly difficult encounters.

A sample liturgy of release:

Lord Jesus, I bring before You the people I encountered today: [Name them specifically or generally]

I carried their stories. I held their pain. I witnessed their suffering. But I acknowledge that I am not their Savior—You are.

I release to You: [Name specific burdens: their anxiety, their trauma, their decisions, their outcomes]

I cannot heal them. I cannot fix them. I cannot save them. But You can. And You already have.

I trust You with what I cannot control. I receive Your peace in exchange for the burdens I was never meant to carry.

Let me sleep in the confidence that You are working while I rest. Amen.

You can write your own version of this, adapting it to your specific context and the burdens you tend to carry. The key is making it concrete—actually naming what you're releasing—so your mind and body register that you're setting it down.

Practice 3: The Physical Gesture

Sometimes we need to embody the release, not just think about it. Physical gestures can help our bodies catch up with what our minds are trying to do.

Possible gestures:

Open hands. Literally open your hands, palms up, and imagine placing the person or burden in your hands. Then lift your hands upward, as if offering them to God. Turn your hands over, releasing your grip, symbolizing that you're letting go.

The sign of the cross. Make the sign of the cross over your own body or in the air, reminding yourself that Christ has already borne this burden at the cross. You don't need to bear it again.

Washing hands. After a difficult encounter, literally wash your hands. Let the water symbolize cleansing—both physical and spiritual. As you wash, pray a simple prayer: "Lord, I leave what isn't mine with You."

Writing and burning. Write down the burdens you're carrying on a piece of paper. Then safely burn the paper, watching it turn to ash. A physical, irreversible act of release.

These practices might feel strange at first, especially if you're not used to embodied prayer. But our bodies hold trauma and stress that our minds

sometimes can't process. Physical acts of release help us let go at a deeper level.

Practice 4: The Boundary Visualization

This practice helps you establish and maintain emotional boundaries during difficult conversations.

Before an encounter: Close your eyes and imagine a boundary around you—whatever image works for you. Some people imagine:

- A circle of light surrounding them
- A protective shield or bubble
- A strong fence with a gate
- Christ standing between them and the other person

The boundary isn't to keep you from caring—it's to keep their emotions from flooding into you. You can be present and compassionate while remaining separate.

During the encounter: If you feel yourself absorbing their anxiety or pain, mentally return to that image. Visualize the boundary holding. Remind yourself: "I can care without carrying. I can be present without taking this into my body."

After the encounter: Visualize their emotions staying with them as they leave. Imagine closing the gate, sealing the boundary. Release them into God's care.

This might sound too simple or even silly, but visualization is a powerful tool. What we imagine affects how we feel and respond. Practicing this kind of boundary visualization trains your nervous system to maintain healthy separation.

Practice 5: The Evening Examen with Release

The Ignatian Examen is a contemplative practice of reviewing your day with God. Add a "release" component to make it a tool for emotional containment.

How to practice:

1. **Begin in silence.** Become aware of God's presence with you.
2. **Review the day with gratitude.** What are you thankful for? Where did you see God's presence?
3. **Review the day with honesty.** Where did you experience difficulty? What burdens did you pick up today?
4. **Notice what you're still carrying.** Pay attention to what you're holding in your body—tension, anxiety, replaying conversations, worry about people you encountered.
5. **Release what isn't yours.** Specifically name what you need to leave with God. Imagine placing each burden at the foot of the cross. See Jesus taking it from you.
6. **Receive God's peace.** "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (Colossians 3:15). Breathe in His peace. Rest in His care.
7. **Look toward tomorrow with trust.** God will be faithful tomorrow too.

The Examen helps you end each day with clean hands, so you're not accumulating pain day after day until you collapse.

Practice 6: The Container Metaphor

This is particularly helpful for therapists, counselors, and those in intensive helping roles.

How it works: Imagine that when someone shares their story with you, it goes into a container. You can see the container. You're holding space for it. But the container has boundaries—the pain stays in the container, separate from you.

You're not in the container with them, drowning in their experience. You're beside the container, witnessing it, honoring it, helping them process it.

At the end of the session, you close the container. It stays with them. You don't carry it home.

In practice: Some counselors literally use a physical container in their office—a box, a bowl, something symbolic. At the end of a session, they might invite the client to "place" what they shared in the container, acknowledging that they've been heard but that the therapist isn't taking this home with them.

This creates healthy expectations for both parties: You're a witness and a guide, not an absorber and a carrier.

Practice 7: Sabbath as Reset

All these practices work better when they're supported by a weekly rhythm of complete release—Sabbath.

Sabbath isn't just time off. It's a theological statement: **God is God, and you are not.**

When you Sabbath, you're saying:

- The world doesn't depend on me
- God's work continues when I stop
- I trust Him with what I'm not doing right now
- I am valuable even when I'm not productive

Sabbath forces you to release—not just for a moment, but for a day.

Everything you're carrying has to be set down. Every burden you've absorbed has to be left with God. Because you're not available to carry it right now.

If you struggle with emotional absorption, Sabbath is essential. It's your weekly practice of proving to yourself that the world doesn't fall apart when you're not constantly managing, helping, fixing, and carrying.

(We'll explore Sabbath more deeply in a later chapter, but know this: Sabbath is one of your most powerful tools for serving without absorbing.)

Ministering From Overflow

There's a reason Jesus used the image of living water when He talked about the spiritual life.

"Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:38).

Rivers flow. They don't run dry. They're constantly replenished from a source beyond themselves.

That's the picture of healthy ministry: overflow.

You're not the source—God is. You're not generating the living water—you're receiving it and letting it flow through you. And because you're not the source, you can't run dry as long as you stay connected to Him.

But when you absorb instead of overflow, you become a reservoir instead of a river. You hold onto everything—every story, every burden, every emotion—and you stagnate. Reservoirs that don't have both inflow and outflow become toxic.

You need to let it flow through, not collect in.

This is what serving from overflow looks like:

- You receive from God regularly—in prayer, Scripture, worship, Sabbath, community
- You give out of that fullness, not out of your own reserves
- You let people's burdens flow through you to God instead of stopping with you
- You trust that God's supply is limitless, even when your capacity isn't
- You stay connected to the Source instead of trying to be the source

When you serve from overflow, you can be generous without being depleted. You can care deeply without being destroyed. You can be fully present without absorbing pain that isn't yours.

Because it's not your river. You're just the riverbed. And the Source never runs dry.

The Peace That Guards

Paul wrote something to the Philippians that applies directly to this struggle:

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

Notice what guards your heart and mind: the peace of God.

Not your own strength. Not your emotional fortitude. Not your ability to compartmentalize. God's peace.

And that peace comes through prayer—through actively bringing your anxieties (including the ones you've absorbed) to God and leaving them there.

This peace "surpasses understanding"—which means it's not logical. It doesn't make rational sense that you can care about someone's suffering without being consumed by anxiety about it. It doesn't compute that you can walk with people through darkness without being swallowed by darkness yourself.

But it's possible. Through the peace of God that guards you.

The Colossians passage says something similar: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (Colossians 3:15).

Rule. Govern. Be the deciding authority.

When you feel anxiety rising—yours or theirs—the peace of Christ can rule instead. When you're tempted to absorb their pain as your own, the peace of Christ can guard your heart. When you're replaying conversations at 2 AM, the peace of Christ can settle your mind.

But you have to let it. You have to practice inviting it. You have to actively choose peace over absorption.

This is spiritual warfare, friends. The enemy would love nothing more than to see you destroyed by compassion fatigue, to watch you burn out and give up,

to convince you that the only way to truly care is to drown alongside the people you're trying to help.

But that's a lie. And the peace of Christ is the weapon that defeats it.

Pause and Reflect:

This chapter has given you several tools. Now it's time to actually use them.

1. Think back over the last week. When did you absorb someone's pain rather than simply holding space for it? How did you know? What did it feel like in your body?
2. Which of the practices described in this chapter resonates most with you? Choose one and commit to trying it this week.
3. Write your own breath prayer—something short and true that you can pray when you feel yourself taking on what isn't yours.
4. Are you serving from overflow or from depletion right now? What needs to change for you to reconnect with the Source?

You cannot serve well from an empty place. And you cannot fill yourself by absorbing others' pain. The only sustainable source is God Himself—and He never runs dry.

Stay connected. Receive. Release. Overflow.

This is how you serve without being consumed.

Chapter 6

Bearing Their Stories: Vicarious Trauma and Spiritual Impact

The first time I heard a story of childhood sexual abuse, I cried with her. The second time, I maintained my composure but felt shaken for days. By the hundredth time, I felt nothing.

And that terrified me more than the tears ever did.

What happened? Where did my compassion go? Had I become hardened, calloused, the kind of helper I'd always promised I wouldn't become?

It took a wise supervisor to help me understand: I wasn't becoming cold. I was becoming traumatized.

There's a phenomenon that happens to people in helping professions—therapists, pastors, social workers, chaplains, nurses, first responders—that we don't talk about enough. It's called vicarious trauma, or secondary traumatic stress, and it's what happens when bearing witness to others' suffering begins to fundamentally change us.

We absorb their stories. Their trauma becomes embedded in our psyche. Their nightmares invade our dreams. Their pain alters our view of the world, of people, of God Himself.

And unlike the compassion fatigue we discussed in Chapter 2—which is about depletion—vicarious trauma is about damage. It's not just that you're tired; it's that you're wounded by proxy. You weren't in the car accident, but you've heard so many descriptions of car accidents that you now flinch every time you drive. You weren't abused, but you've sat with so many abuse survivors that your nervous system responds as if you were.

You carry stories that aren't yours. And those stories are changing you from the inside out.

This is one of the most overlooked costs of caring. And if we don't learn to process it, it will either destroy us or turn us into people who can no longer feel.

When Suffering Enters Your Spirit

Let me be clear about something from the beginning: Vicarious trauma is not a sign of weakness. It's not evidence that you're "not cut out for this work." It's not a spiritual failure or a lack of faith.

Vicarious trauma is the natural consequence of being a compassionate human who regularly encounters the worst of what humans do to each other.

You were designed by God to be affected by suffering. When you hear about a child being harmed, you should feel disturbed. When you encounter injustice, you should feel righteous anger. When you sit with someone's profound loss, you should feel grief.

The problem isn't that you're affected. The problem is when the accumulation of these exposures overwhelms your capacity to process them, and they begin to fundamentally alter your sense of safety, trust, and hope.

What Vicarious Trauma Looks Like

Vicarious trauma manifests differently in different people, but here are common signs:

Intrusive thoughts and images. You can't stop thinking about the stories you've heard. Images from their trauma pop into your mind unbidden—while you're making dinner, playing with your kids, trying to sleep. You find yourself imagining the details they didn't tell you, your mind filling in the horror.

Hypervigilance about safety. After hearing story after story of violence, betrayal, or loss, you become hyperaware of danger everywhere. You're constantly scanning for threats. You don't let your kids do things that other parents consider normal because you know what can happen. You see the world as fundamentally unsafe.

Loss of faith in humanity. You've heard too many stories of what people do to each other. You've seen too much evil, too much cruelty, too much selfishness. You start to believe that humans are fundamentally terrible. Trust becomes almost impossible.

Spiritual disruption. You question God's goodness, His presence, His power. How can a good God allow what you've witnessed in your clients' stories? Where was He when these things happened? Why doesn't He intervene? Your theology that worked fine in seminary starts to crumble under the weight of real suffering.

Numbing and detachment. To protect yourself from the constant onslaught of pain, you shut down emotionally. You go through the motions, but you don't feel much of anything. You've developed what therapists call "compassion numbness"—not compassion fatigue, but an actual inability to access compassion.

Physical symptoms. Your body holds the trauma you've absorbed. Tension headaches. Gastrointestinal problems. Chest tightness. Sleep disturbances. Your nervous system is in a constant state of arousal from exposure to others' trauma.

Avoidance behaviors. You start avoiding things that remind you of the trauma stories you carry. Certain news stories. Types of movies. Conversations about specific topics. You might even avoid people or situations that could potentially add to the trauma load you're already carrying.

Changes in worldview. The most insidious effect of vicarious trauma is how it changes the lens through which you see everything. The world seems darker. People seem more dangerous. The future seems more hopeless. You've lost your sense of wonder, beauty, and possibility.

This is what it means for suffering to enter your spirit—it doesn't just pass through you; it takes up residence. And if you don't learn to process and release it, it will slowly poison everything.

The Stories We Carry

I'll never forget Rebecca's story. Or Michael's. Or the woman whose name I can't remember but whose trauma narrative is etched in my memory with painful clarity.

I carry pieces of hundreds of stories—stories of abuse, addiction, violence, loss, betrayal. Stories of children harmed by the very people who should have protected them. Stories of marriages destroyed by deception. Stories of dreams shattered by illness, accident, injustice.

And I'm not alone. Every helper carries stories.

The hospice nurse carries the memory of patients who died in pain, alone, afraid.

The social worker carries images of homes where children lived in conditions no child should endure.

The pastor carries confessions of sins so dark they still make him shudder years later.

The emergency room doctor carries the faces of people he couldn't save.

The therapist carries secrets that would devastate families if they were ever spoken aloud.

We are story-keepers. And sometimes the stories we keep are too heavy to bear.

Why This Is Different From General Stress

It's important to understand that vicarious trauma is distinct from the normal stress of a demanding job.

General occupational stress comes from workload, time pressure, organizational dynamics, difficult personalities. It's exhausting, but it's situational. When the pressure lessens, you recover.

Vicarious trauma is different. It's not about how much work you're doing—it's about what kind of material you're absorbing. You could see fewer clients or

have a lighter caseload, but if those clients are sharing deeply traumatic material, you're still at risk for vicarious trauma.

And here's what makes it particularly insidious: **You often don't realize it's happening until it's already happened.** The changes are gradual. Each story adds a little more weight, darkens your worldview a little more, erodes your sense of safety a little further. Until one day you realize you're not the same person you were when you started this work.

You've been changed by bearing witness. And not all of those changes are good.

The Myth of Emotional Self-Sacrifice

There's a dangerous myth in helping professions that goes something like this: "If you truly love people, you'll be willing to be destroyed by their pain. Real compassion means sacrificing your own emotional well-being for theirs. If you're protecting yourself, you're not really caring."

This sounds noble. Sacrificial. Christ-like, even.

But it's a lie. And it's a lie that destroys helpers.

Compassion does not require emotional self-sacrifice.

Let me say that again because it's so counter to what many of us have been taught: Compassion does not require you to emotionally sacrifice yourself.

Jesus had compassion that moved Him in His gut. But He wasn't destroyed by it. He didn't become traumatized by the suffering He witnessed. He remained whole, grounded, at peace—even while engaging with profound pain.

Why? Because He had boundaries. He had rhythms. He withdrew to pray. He knew who He was. And He trusted the Father with outcomes He couldn't control.

Jesus shows us that it's possible to care deeply without being consumed. To be moved by suffering without being traumatized by it. To hold space for pain without absorbing it as your own.

The False Equation

The myth operates on a false equation: **Degree of caring = Degree of personal suffering**

According to this logic, if you're not devastated by what you hear, you must not care enough. If you can go home and sleep peacefully after a day of encountering trauma, you must be callous. If you protect yourself from vicarious trauma, you must not be fully present.

But that's not how it works. You can care deeply while also maintaining your own mental and spiritual health. In fact, you *must* maintain your health if you want to care sustainably.

Think about it this way: If you're a therapist working with trauma survivors, which is more helpful?

- A therapist who absorbs their trauma and becomes traumatized herself, eventually burning out and leaving the profession
- A therapist who remains grounded, processes what she hears, and continues to be available to help trauma survivors for decades

The second option isn't less compassionate—it's more sustainable. And sustainability is a form of love.

What Healthy Compassion Looks Like

Healthy compassion is:

- **Present but bounded.** You're fully there with the person, but you're not losing yourself in their experience.
- **Moved but not paralyzed.** Their suffering touches you, but it doesn't incapacitate you.
- **Affected but not traumatized.** You feel the weight of what you hear, but you process it rather than storing it.

- **Caring without carrying.** You hold space for their burden without taking ownership of it.

This kind of compassion requires active practices of self-care, emotional processing, and spiritual grounding. It doesn't happen automatically. You have to be intentional about protecting yourself from vicarious trauma.

And that's not selfish—it's stewardship.

Creating Rhythms of Debriefing and Spiritual Cleansing

If vicarious trauma is the accumulation of unprocessed exposure to others' suffering, then the antidote is regular, intentional processing and release.

You need rhythms—daily, weekly, monthly—that help you debrief what you've encountered and spiritually cleanse what you've absorbed.

Daily Debriefing Practices

The Post-Session Release

After particularly heavy sessions or encounters, take five minutes to actively release before moving on. This might look like:

- Breath prayer: "Lord, I release [name] to You. I release this story to You."
- Physical gesture: Washing your hands while praying a prayer of release
- Journaling: Write down key points of what you heard, then write a prayer releasing it to God
- Movement: Take a brief walk, shake out your body, do some stretches—physically releasing tension

Don't go directly from a trauma disclosure to your next appointment or task. Build in transition time.

The Evening Download

At the end of each day, create a practice of downloading what you've carried:

1. **Acknowledge.** What stories did I bear today? What difficult material did I encounter?
2. **Notice.** How is my body responding? Where am I holding tension? What emotions am I carrying?
3. **Name.** What specifically needs to be released? What am I still holding that isn't mine?
4. **Release.** Through prayer, bring each burden to God. Visualize laying it at the foot of the cross. Speak out loud: "This is not mine to carry."
5. **Receive.** Ask God for His peace, His perspective, His presence. Breathe it in. Let it replace what you've released.

This doesn't have to be lengthy—even 10-15 minutes can make a significant difference. The key is consistency.

The Scripture Anchor

Choose a Scripture passage that grounds you in truth and repeat it daily. Some helpers find it helpful to write it on a card and keep it visible in their workspace. When you feel the weight of what you're hearing, return to this truth.

Examples:

- "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18)
- "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23)
- "The Spirit helps us in our weakness" (Romans 8:26)

Weekly Cleansing Practices

Supervision or Peer Consultation

You should not be processing vicarious trauma alone. Regular supervision or peer consultation where you can talk through difficult cases is essential.

This isn't optional. If you're regularly encountering traumatic material, you need someone with whom you can debrief—someone who understands the work, who can help you process what you're hearing, and who can watch for signs of vicarious trauma you might not see in yourself.

This might be:

- Formal clinical supervision
- Peer consultation groups
- A trusted colleague you meet with regularly
- A spiritual director who understands your work

Sabbath as Spiritual Cleansing

Your weekly Sabbath (which we'll explore more deeply in Chapter 8) isn't just about rest—it's about release and renewal.

On Sabbath, you actively set down everything you've been carrying. You trust God with the people you're helping. You remember that the work continues without you. You receive life instead of constantly giving it.

Think of Sabbath as your weekly reset—a chance to be cleansed of the week's accumulated trauma exposure before beginning again.

The Practice of Beauty

Vicarious trauma makes the world seem dark, ugly, dangerous. You need regular exposure to beauty as a counterbalance.

Make it a weekly practice to intentionally encounter something beautiful:

- Nature: Take a hike, watch a sunset, sit by water
- Art: Visit a museum, listen to music that moves you, read poetry
- Creativity: Paint, garden, cook, make something with your hands

- Worship: Sing, lift your hands, let yourself be caught up in wonder at who God is

Beauty is healing. It reminds you that the horror you've witnessed isn't the whole story. There is still goodness, still wonder, still glory.

Monthly and Quarterly Practices

The Trauma Inventory

Once a month, take stock:

- What traumatic material have I been exposed to this month?
- How am I different than I was 30 days ago?
- What symptoms of vicarious trauma am I noticing?
- What do I need to address or release?

Write it down. Bring it to supervision. Don't let it accumulate unchecked.

The Longer Retreat

Quarterly, if possible, take a day for longer spiritual cleansing. This might include:

- Extended solitude and silence
- Worship and prayer
- Walking a labyrinth
- Journaling about what you're carrying
- Confession and absolution
- Receiving communion or another sacrament
- Meeting with a spiritual director

The point is to create space for deeper processing than your daily or weekly practices allow. This is preventive care, not just crisis intervention.

When to Seek Professional Help

Sometimes the practices above aren't enough. Sometimes the vicarious trauma goes deep enough that you need professional intervention.

Seek help from a therapist if:

- You're having intrusive thoughts or nightmares related to clients' stories
- You're experiencing symptoms of PTSD (hypervigilance, avoidance, flashbacks, severe anxiety)
- You're having thoughts of self-harm or suicide
- Your relationships are significantly impaired
- You're turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms (substance abuse, compulsive behaviors, etc.)
- You've tried the practices above consistently but aren't experiencing relief

There's no shame in this. You wouldn't judge a soldier for developing PTSD after combat. Why would you judge yourself for being affected by the relentless exposure to trauma that your work requires?

Getting help is part of stewardship. It's caring for the tool God has given you—yourself—so you can continue the work He's called you to.

Lament: The Practice We've Forgotten

One of the most powerful tools for processing vicarious trauma is also one of the most neglected in modern Western Christianity: lament.

Lament is bringing your pain, your questions, your anger, your confusion to God without tying it up in a neat bow. It's being honest about the horror you've witnessed and the anguish it causes you. It's crying out to God about the brokenness of the world without immediately jumping to "but I know You're sovereign" or "but I trust You have a plan."

Lament is prayer that's honest before it's hopeful.

Why We Avoid Lament

Most of us have been taught, implicitly or explicitly, that lament is a lack of faith. That if we really trusted God, we wouldn't complain to Him. That bringing our anger or confusion to God is disrespectful.

So we sanitize our prayers. We skip over the pain and go straight to praise. We perform faith we don't feel because we think that's what spiritual maturity looks like.

But here's what we miss: **The Bible is full of lament.**

Roughly one-third of the Psalms are laments. The book of Lamentations is in the canon of Scripture. Job's entire story is essentially one long lament. Jesus Himself cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

God gave us lament because He knew we would need it. He knew we would encounter suffering—our own and others'—that couldn't be fixed with trite phrases or spiritual bypassing. He knew we would need a way to bring our full humanity before Him.

Lament isn't a failure of faith. It's an act of faith—faith that God is big enough to handle our honesty, present enough to hear our pain, and loving enough to stay with us in it.

The Structure of Biblical Lament

Biblical laments follow a pattern that can guide us:

- 1. Address to God.** The lament begins by turning toward God, not away from Him. Even in pain, we bring it to Him.
- 2. Complaint.** This is where you get honest. You name the suffering, the injustice, the horror. You don't minimize it or spiritualize it away. You say what is.

3. Request. You ask God to act. To intervene. To heal. To make it right. You don't resign yourself to suffering—you plead with Him to do something about it.

4. Expression of trust. Not false optimism, but a choice to remember who God is even when circumstances suggest otherwise. This isn't denying the pain—it's holding pain and hope in tension.

5. Vow of praise. A commitment to continue worshiping even while you wait. Even while the pain remains. This is defiant hope—choosing to praise not because everything is fine, but because God is still God.

Not every lament includes all five elements, and they don't always appear in this order. But the pattern shows us how to bring our full selves—pain and hope, questions and trust—before God.

Lament as Processing Tool

For those of us carrying others' trauma, lament becomes a powerful processing tool.

When you've heard a story that's shaken your faith in humanity, you can lament: *God, how could this happen? Where were You when this child was being harmed? Why didn't You stop it? I don't understand Your ways. I'm angry and confused and heartbroken.*

When you're carrying trauma that's invaded your dreams: *Lord, I can't carry this anymore. These images are haunting me. This pain that isn't mine is crushing me. Please take it. Please give me rest. Please let me sleep without nightmares.*

When the accumulation of suffering has made you question whether there's any goodness left: *Father, I've seen too much evil. I've heard too many stories of cruelty. I'm losing my ability to see beauty. I don't trust anyone anymore. Help my unbelief. Show me that there's still hope.*

Lament gives you permission to bring all of this to God without pretending you're okay when you're not.

How to Practice Lament

Written Lament

Write your own psalm of lament. Don't censor yourself. Use the structure above as a guide, but let it be raw and honest. Write until you've said everything that needs to be said.

Some people find it helpful to write these laments and then burn them, symbolizing that they've been offered to God and released.

Praying the Psalms of Lament

When you can't find your own words, pray the words Scripture gives you. These psalms are particularly powerful for processing vicarious trauma:

- Psalm 13: "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?"
- Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
- Psalm 42: "Why are you cast down, O my soul?"
- Psalm 88: The darkest psalm, ending without resolution
- Psalm 130: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD"

Read them aloud. Pray them slowly. Let them give voice to what you're feeling.

Communal Lament

Lament isn't meant to be only private. Find others—a small group, a fellow helper, a prayer partner—with whom you can lament together.

There's something powerful about voicing your pain in the presence of others who understand, who can witness your lament and say, "We're here. We hear you. You're not alone."

Lament in Worship

Some churches and communities are recovering the practice of corporate lament—bringing communal grief and confusion to God together. If your

community doesn't do this, consider suggesting it. Or create your own liturgy of lament with trusted friends.

The Spirit Who Intercedes

Here's the most beautiful truth about lament: You don't have to do it alone.

"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8:26-27).

When the trauma you're carrying is so heavy you can't even form words, the Spirit prays for you. When you don't know what to ask for, He intercedes. When your groaning is too deep for language, He translates it before the Father.

You are not alone in your lament. The Spirit is with you in it, giving voice to what you can't articulate, bringing to God what you can't bear on your own.

This is grace. In your weakest, most traumatized moment, God Himself is praying for you and in you.

The Morning Mercies

After all the talk of trauma, processing, and lament, we need to end here: hope.

"The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him'" (Lamentations 3:22-24).

This passage comes from the middle of a book of lament—after describing the horrors of Jerusalem's destruction, after expressing deep anguish and confusion. And right in the middle of all that pain, this declaration: God's mercies are new every morning.

Not that the pain is gone. Not that the trauma has been erased. But that God's faithfulness is greater than the suffering.

Every morning, you get to start fresh. Every morning, God's mercies are there—new, abundant, sufficient for what this day holds.

The trauma you witnessed yesterday doesn't have to define today. The stories you carried last week don't have to crush you this week. The accumulation of suffering you've absorbed over months or years doesn't have to be your future.

Because God's mercies are new. Every. Single. Morning.

This is your hope: That as you practice releasing, processing, lamenting, and receiving, God is faithful to cleanse, restore, and renew. That bearing witness to suffering doesn't have to destroy you. That you can continue in this calling without losing yourself.

Not because you're strong enough, but because His mercies are sufficient.

And they're waiting for you tomorrow morning, fresh and new, no matter how heavy today has been.

Pause and Reflect:

This chapter has been heavy because the topic is heavy. Take time to process.

1. As you read this chapter, what symptoms of vicarious trauma did you recognize in yourself? Write them down. Don't minimize them.
2. What rhythms of processing and release do you currently have? What's missing that you need to add?
3. Write a lament—using the biblical structure or free-form. Bring to God what you've been carrying that's too heavy to bear. Be completely honest.
4. Who in your life can help you process vicarious trauma? If you don't have someone, make finding that person a priority this week.

Remember: You cannot pour from an empty cup, and you cannot bear endless trauma without support and processing. This is not a sign of weakness—it's a sign that you're human.

And God designed humans to need rest, renewal, and release.

Give yourself what you need. The people you serve will benefit from your wholeness more than from your woundedness.

Chapter 7

The Shepherd Must Also Rest: Meaningful Self-Care for the Christian Caregiver

I was hospitalized on a Tuesday.

Not for anything dramatic—no heart attack, no breakdown, no crisis that would make for a compelling testimony. Just a body that had finally said "enough" after years of me ignoring every warning sign it sent.

The doctor was kind but direct: "Your body is shutting down because you won't let it rest. If you don't change how you're living, this will get worse."

I wanted to argue. To explain that I was doing important work. That people needed me. That I didn't have the luxury of rest.

But lying in that hospital bed, attached to an IV because I was too dehydrated and depleted to function, I couldn't deny the obvious truth: **I had confused martyrdom with ministry.**

I thought rest was optional—a luxury for people with less important work than mine. I believed that caring for myself was selfish when so many others needed care. I'd turned self-sacrifice into an idol, and my body had finally rebelled against the god I'd made of busyness.

That day in the hospital, I began to learn what it took me years to fully embrace: Self-care isn't selfish. It's stewardship. And rest isn't just a good idea—it's a command from God Himself.

The Guilt That Guards the Gate

Before we can talk about what self-care looks like, we need to address the massive barrier that keeps most Christian caregivers from practicing it: guilt.

We feel guilty for:

- Taking time off when people still need help
- Spending money on ourselves when others have greater needs

- Enjoying pleasurable activities while others suffer
- Setting boundaries that disappoint people
- Prioritizing our own wellbeing over someone else's urgent request
- Resting when there's more work to be done

This guilt is pervasive, persistent, and often deeply rooted in our theology and identity. We've been taught—explicitly or implicitly—that dying to self means destroying ourselves for others. That being Christ-like means constant self-sacrifice with no regard for our own needs. That if we have time or resources for self-care, we must not be giving enough to ministry.

But here's what we miss: **This theology is not biblical. It's destructive.**

What Jesus Actually Taught

Jesus didn't teach self-destruction. He taught self-surrender—which is entirely different.

Self-destruction says: "I have no value except what I can give to others. My needs don't matter. I should grind myself into dust for the sake of ministry."

Self-surrender says: "I give my whole self—body, soul, and spirit—to God. And because I belong to Him, I steward what He's given me. Including myself."

Jesus told us to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:39). Not instead of ourselves. Not at the expense of ourselves. As ourselves—with the same care, attention, and compassion.

The parable of the talents teaches stewardship—caring for what God has entrusted to us and investing it wisely (Matthew 25:14-30). God has entrusted you with yourself. Your body. Your mind. Your emotions. Your spirit. How you care for these is an act of stewardship for which you'll give account.

The False Dichotomy

We operate with a false dichotomy: Either I care for others OR I care for myself.

But this is a lie. The truth is more paradoxical: **You care for others best when you also care for yourself.**

Think about it practically:

- You can't give energy you don't have
- You can't offer peace from a place of inner chaos
- You can't model healthy boundaries if you have none
- You can't point people to the living water if you're dying of thirst
- You can't be fully present if you're utterly depleted

The question isn't whether you'll care for yourself. The question is whether you'll do it intentionally and healthily, or whether you'll wait until your body forces you to through illness, injury, or breakdown.

Self-care isn't about choosing yourself over others. It's about ensuring you have something to give—not just today, but for years to come.

Rest as Worship

We need to reclaim a biblical understanding of rest. Not as laziness. Not as weakness. Not as optional.

Rest is worship.

Let me show you why.

God Rested

The very first thing we learn about rest in Scripture is that God Himself rested.

"And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation" (Genesis 2:2-3).

Now, God doesn't get tired. He doesn't need to recover His strength. His rest wasn't about recuperation—it was about completion, satisfaction, delight. He rested because the work was done and it was good.

But more than that—**He rested to model something for us.** To show us that we're not meant to work endlessly. That rest is built into the rhythm of creation itself. That ceasing from work is holy.

When you rest, you're not just recovering. You're imitating God.

God Commanded Rest

Rest isn't just something God did. It's something He commanded.

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work... For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exodus 20:8-11).

This is one of the Ten Commandments. Not a suggestion. Not a nice idea for people who have the luxury. A command.

And notice what it says: The Sabbath is "to the LORD your God." Your rest isn't primarily for you—it's for Him. It's an act of worship, an acknowledgment that He is God and you are not.

When you refuse to rest, you're not just being unwise. You're being disobedient.

Rest Declares Truth

Every time you rest, you make a theological declaration. You proclaim:

"God is God, and I am not." The world doesn't depend on me. God's work continues when I stop. I'm not indispensable.

"I trust God more than I trust my own effort." I believe that God will provide, sustain, and work even when I'm not working. My security isn't in my productivity.

"I am valuable even when I'm not useful." My worth isn't tied to what I accomplish. I'm beloved simply because I'm God's child, not because of what I produce.

"God is sufficient." He doesn't need my strength to accomplish His purposes. He invites my participation, but He's not dependent on it.

Rest is an act of faith. It's trusting God enough to stop.

When you rest, you worship. When you refuse to rest, you reveal that you're trusting in yourself more than in God.

Sabbath as Resistance

In our contemporary burnout culture—especially in ministry contexts—Sabbath is more than personal self-care. It's spiritual resistance.

What We're Resisting

We're resisting the lie that our worth equals our productivity. Our culture screams that you're only as valuable as your output. Rest says, "That's not true. I'm beloved before I'm useful."

We're resisting the idolatry of busyness. We wear our exhaustion like a badge of honor. We brag about how little we sleep, how full our calendars are, how much we're juggling. Sabbath says, "Busy isn't better. Being isn't less valuable than doing."

We're resisting the tyranny of urgency. Everything feels urgent. Every need feels like it can't wait. Sabbath says, "Not everything is an emergency. The world can wait a day."

We're resisting the consumerist mindset that we're human doings, not human beings. Capitalism wants to reduce us to our economic output. Sabbath says, "I'm a person, not a machine. I'm created in the image of God, not in the image of productivity."

We're resisting the belief that God needs our help to run the universe. We act like if we don't show up, everything will fall apart. Sabbath says, "God was doing fine before I existed, and He'll be fine when I'm gone. He's got this."

Sabbath as Defiance

In this context, keeping Sabbath is an act of defiance. It's saying no to a culture that wants to consume you. It's setting boundaries against systems that benefit from your burnout. It's choosing a different way.

The Israelites were commanded to keep Sabbath partly as a way of declaring they were no longer slaves in Egypt. Slaves don't get days off. Slaves' value is entirely tied to their productivity. Slaves can't stop working because their masters won't let them.

But free people rest. Free people can cease from labor because their identity isn't tied up in it. Free people trust God enough to stop.

When you Sabbath, you declare: "I am not a slave—not to productivity, not to others' expectations, not to my own drivenness. I am free in Christ."

This is why Sabbath feels so hard. It's not just that you're tired and need rest. It's that observing Sabbath requires you to confront every lie you've believed about your worth, your identity, and your indispensability.

Sabbath strips away the false self you've built around busyness and achievement. And that feels vulnerable, even frightening.

But it's also liberating. On the other side of that discomfort is freedom.

The Shepherd's Psalm

David—shepherd, king, man of war and worship—wrote something profound about rest:

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul" (Psalm 23:1-3).

Notice the posture David describes. He's not the shepherd here—he's the sheep. And what does the Good Shepherd do? He makes him lie down. He leads him beside still waters. He restores his soul.

Even Shepherds Need Shepherding

Here's what we miss: David was a shepherd himself. He knew the work of caring for sheep. And yet, in this psalm, he places himself in the position of the one being cared for.

The shepherd needs a Shepherd.

The caregiver needs care.

The helper needs help.

You cannot be the shepherd to everyone. You also need to be the sheep—to lie down in green pastures, to be led beside still waters, to have your soul restored.

And notice—the Good Shepherd doesn't just invite David to rest. He makes him lie down. Because sometimes we're so driven, so convinced of our own necessity, so unable to stop, that we need to be made to rest.

What Restoration Requires

"He restores my soul."

Restoration requires cessation. You can't restore something that's constantly in use. You can't repair a car engine while it's running. You can't heal a broken bone that's being used to carry weight.

Your soul needs restoration. And restoration requires you to stop.

Not forever. Not permanently. But regularly, rhythmically, intentionally.

The green pastures and still waters aren't optional luxuries for sheep who have time. They're essential for survival. Without them, the sheep dies.

Without rest, you will not survive this calling. You'll burn out, break down, or become so hardened that you're no longer the person God called you to be.

Designing Your Personal Rhythm of Renewal

Theology is essential, but at some point, we need to get practical. What does meaningful self-care actually look like for a Christian caregiver?

It looks different for everyone because we're all wired differently, in different seasons, with different needs. But there are some universal principles that can guide you in designing your own rhythm of renewal.

The Four Levels of Rest

Think about rest in four concentric circles, each building on the one before it.

Daily Rest: Micro-Renewals

These are small, regular practices woven throughout your day. They're not large time commitments, but they're essential interruptions in the constant output.

Examples:

- Taking three deep breaths before each session or appointment
- A five-minute walk between intense encounters
- Praying a breath prayer when you feel overwhelmed
- Stepping outside to feel sunlight on your face
- Stretching your body after sitting for long periods
- Drinking water intentionally, not just when you're desperately thirsty
- Pausing for lunch instead of working through it

These aren't optional extras when you have time. They're necessary resets that keep you functioning throughout the day.

Weekly Rest: Sabbath

One full day each week where you cease from work. Not just physically stopping, but emotionally and spiritually releasing work.

This is non-negotiable. Not because I say so, but because God did.

Your Sabbath should include:

- No work—not even "just checking email" or "quick prep for tomorrow"
- Activities that replenish rather than deplete you
- Worship in some form
- Connection with people you love (not in a caregiving capacity)
- Play, beauty, delight
- Extended time with God without agenda

We'll talk more about Sabbath practices in a moment, but for now, know this: You need a full day, every week, where you're not available for work. Period.

Quarterly Rest: Extended Retreat

Every three to four months, you need more than a day. You need extended time away—ideally 2-3 days minimum—for deeper restoration.

This might look like:

- A personal retreat at a monastery or retreat center
- A long weekend completely unplugged
- Time in nature with minimal agenda
- Extended solitude and silence
- Spiritual direction or intensive counseling
- Simply sleeping, reading, resting without guilt

Quarterly retreats allow you to address accumulation that weekly Sabbath doesn't fully resolve. They give you space to hear God in ways you can't amid the noise of normal life.

Annual Rest: Sabbatical

Ideally, every seven years (following the biblical pattern), you should take an extended sabbatical—several weeks to several months away from your work.

I know this isn't possible for everyone. Not every organization offers sabbatical. Not everyone has the financial resources. But it should be an ideal you work toward, even if you can't fully achieve it.

At minimum, you need annual extended vacation—at least two weeks where you're completely away from work, not just physically absent but mentally and emotionally disengaged.

Use this time to:

- Address deep soul issues that can't be tackled in shorter breaks
- Dream about the future
- Process accumulated trauma or grief
- Reconnect with who you are outside your role
- Return to hobbies and interests you've neglected
- Repair relationships that ministry has strained

The ABIDE Framework for Self-Care

To help you think comprehensively about self-care, use the ABIDE framework. Meaningful self-care addresses all these dimensions:

A - Attention (Spiritual)

How are you tending your relationship with God?

- Prayer and Scripture reading that's personal, not just professional
- Worship that's participatory, not performative
- Spiritual direction or soul care
- Practices like silence, solitude, contemplation
- Sabbath-keeping

B - Body (Physical)

How are you caring for your physical self?

- Adequate sleep (7-9 hours for most people)
- Nourishing food, not just fuel
- Regular movement and exercise
- Medical and dental care
- Physical touch (appropriate, healthy touch is essential for humans)
- Sensory pleasures (warm showers, soft textures, good scents)

I - Intellect (Mental)

How are you engaging your mind in life-giving ways?

- Reading for pleasure, not just for work
- Learning something new
- Engaging with art, music, or culture
- Stimulating conversations
- Creative pursuits
- Hobbies that challenge you

D - Delight (Emotional)

What brings you joy?

- Activities you do purely for enjoyment
- Play—yes, adults need play
- Laughter and humor
- Beauty—art, nature, music
- Celebration and festivity

- Pleasure without productivity

E - Engagement (Relational)

How are you connecting with others outside your caregiving role?

- Friendships where you're not the helper
- Family time that's quality, not just squeezed-in
- Community and belonging
- Being known, not just being needed
- Receiving care from others
- Fun social activities

Look at this framework and ask: Which dimension am I neglecting most? That's where you need to start.

Designing Your Unique Rhythm

Now that you understand the levels and dimensions, it's time to get specific. Your rhythm of renewal should be:

Personalized. What restores you might deplete someone else. Introverts and extroverts rest differently. Creative types and analytical types renew differently. Honor your unique design.

Realistic. Don't create an ideal rhythm you can't actually maintain. Start small. One change at a time. Build gradually.

Scheduled. If it's not on your calendar, it won't happen. Treat self-care appointments with the same non-negotiable status as work commitments.

Diverse. Don't rely on just one form of rest. You need variety—physical, emotional, spiritual, relational, creative.

Adaptive. Your needs change with seasons. What worked last year might not work now. Stay attuned and adjust accordingly.

Sample Rhythms

Here are examples of what this might look like in practice:

Sarah - Therapist, Introvert, Single

- Daily: 20-minute morning prayer, lunch walk, evening journaling
- Weekly: Saturday Sabbath—hiking, reading, worship at evening service
- Quarterly: 3-day silent retreat at nearby monastery
- Annual: 2-week international trip to a place she's always wanted to visit

Marcus - Pastor, Extrovert, Married with Kids

- Daily: Morning workout, prayer during commute, family dinner (no phone)
- Weekly: Friday Sabbath—date night with wife, game time with kids, Sunday evening with friends
- Quarterly: Weekend away with wife, no ministry talk allowed
- Annual: Week-long family vacation plus a few days alone for extended prayer and planning

Elena - Hospice Nurse, Midlife, Widow

- Daily: Morning meditation and Scripture, afternoon tea break, evening walk
- Weekly: Sunday Sabbath—church, lunch with friends, art class, long bath
- Quarterly: Visit grandchildren out of state for long weekend
- Annual: Pilgrimage (has walked the Camino, visited Holy Land, plans to visit monasteries in Greece)

Notice how different these are. They're customized to personality, season of life, resources, and preferences. Your rhythm won't look like any of these—and that's exactly right.

Mary's Choice

In Luke 10, we find a story that speaks directly to this tension between doing and being.

Martha is busy serving—cooking, preparing, working. Mary sits at Jesus' feet, simply being present to Him. Martha gets frustrated and asks Jesus to tell Mary to help.

Jesus responds: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42).

What Jesus Didn't Say

Notice what Jesus didn't say:

- He didn't say serving is bad
- He didn't say Martha's work didn't matter
- He didn't say productivity is wrong

Service is good. Work matters. Productivity has value.

But **being with Jesus is more important than working for Jesus.**

The One Thing

"One thing is necessary."

In a life of competing demands, endless needs, and constant urgency, there's one thing that's necessary—and it's not more service. It's sitting at Jesus' feet.

This is the heart of self-care for the Christian caregiver: **You cannot give what you haven't received.**

If you're not regularly, consistently, deeply receiving from Jesus—His presence, His peace, His love, His rest—you have nothing of eternal value to offer others. You're running on fumes, giving from depletion, offering your own meager resources instead of His abundant supply.

Martha was serving Jesus, but she'd forgotten to be with Jesus. And in her busyness, she'd become "anxious and troubled."

Does that sound familiar?

Mary chose the good portion—presence over productivity, being over doing, receiving before giving.

And Jesus said it wouldn't be taken from her. No one could steal that time. No urgency could erase the value of it. No productivity metric could diminish its worth.

The same is true for you. The time you spend at Jesus' feet—resting, receiving, simply being—is not wasted. It's the most essential thing you do.

Overcoming Obstacles to Rest

Even when we're convinced rest is necessary, we face real obstacles. Let's address the most common ones.

"I don't have time."

You don't have time not to rest. The question isn't whether you'll lose time—it's whether you'll lose it to intentional rest or to forced breakdown.

You make time for what you value. If rest isn't happening, it's a values issue, not a time issue.

"People need me."

People will always need you. That need is bottomless. If you wait until all the needs are met before you rest, you will never rest.

God doesn't need you as much as you think He does. He's been running the universe without your help, and He'll manage while you sleep.

"I feel guilty resting when others are suffering."

Your guilt doesn't alleviate their suffering. Your burnout doesn't help them. Your martyrdom serves no one.

You honor suffering people by being healthy enough to walk with them for the long haul, not by destroying yourself in solidarity with their pain.

"Rest feels boring/uncomfortable/wrong."

Of course it does. You've been running on adrenaline and achievement for so long that rest feels foreign. Your body and mind need to relearn how to be still.

This discomfort is not a sign you're doing it wrong. It's a sign you've been going too hard for too long. Sit with the discomfort. It will pass.

"My organization doesn't support rest."

This is a real problem. Some ministry contexts actively discourage rest, reward overwork, and penalize boundaries.

If you're in this situation, you have some hard choices to make. You can:

- Work to change the culture (if you have influence)
- Set boundaries anyway and accept the consequences
- Find a different context that values health

What you can't do is stay in an unhealthy system while expecting to remain healthy. Something will break—probably you.

"I don't know how to rest."

Then you need to learn. Start small:

- Sit in silence for five minutes
- Take a walk with no destination
- Read a book for pleasure
- Eat a meal slowly, tasting each bite
- Watch the sunset
- Do nothing with no guilt

Learning to rest is a skill. Be patient with yourself as you develop it.

The Invitation

Let me end with this invitation, straight from Jesus Himself:

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Jesus isn't inviting you to work harder. He's inviting you to rest.

Not after you finish everything. Not when you've earned it. Not if you have time.

Right now. As you are. Weary and heavy laden.

Come and rest.

This isn't optional. This isn't a luxury. This is how you survive—and thrive—in helping work.

The shepherd must also rest. And there's a Shepherd who's been waiting to make you lie down in green pastures, to lead you beside still waters, to restore your soul.

Will you let Him?

Pause and Reflect:

It's time to stop reading and start doing.

1. Look at the ABIDE framework. Which dimension of self-care are you most neglecting? What's one small step you can take in that area this week?
2. When is your Sabbath? If you don't currently have one, what day can you designate? What would need to change in your schedule to protect that day?

3. Write out your ideal rhythm of renewal using the four levels (daily, weekly, quarterly, annual). Don't worry about whether it's realistic yet—just dream. Then look at the gap between your ideal and your reality. What's one change you can make to close that gap?
4. What obstacle to rest is strongest for you? What would it take to overcome it?
5. Right now—before you move on to the next chapter—schedule one act of self-care. Put it on your calendar. Make it non-negotiable.

The shepherd must also rest. And the Good Shepherd is inviting you to do exactly that.

Will you accept the invitation?

Chapter 8

Your Wounds Are Not a Disqualification: Why Healers Need Healing Too

The breakdown happened in the most mundane way possible.

I was driving to lead a workshop on self-care for ministry leaders—yes, the irony is not lost on me—when a song came on the radio. Nothing significant about the song. Just a melody that reminded me of something I'd been avoiding for months.

And suddenly I couldn't breathe. I pulled over to the side of the road, gripping the steering wheel, sobbing so hard I thought I might be sick. Years of unprocessed grief, unacknowledged pain, and carefully maintained composure came pouring out all at once.

I called the workshop coordinator from the side of the road. "I can't come. I can't teach about self-care when I'm falling apart. I'm a fraud."

She was quiet for a moment, then said something that changed my life: "You're not a fraud. You're human. And maybe the fact that you're falling apart means it's time to get the help you've been telling everyone else to get."

She was right. I'd spent years helping others process their pain while refusing to process my own. I'd counseled hundreds of people to see therapists while insisting I didn't need one myself. I'd preached vulnerability while maintaining a carefully crafted image of having it all together.

I'd believed the myth that wounded healers are disqualified healers.

But the truth is exactly the opposite: **Your wounds aren't a disqualification—they're often your greatest qualification. But only if you're willing to bring them to the Light and let them be healed.**

The Myth of the Strong Minister

There's an image we carry—those of us in helping professions—of what we're supposed to be. Strong. Together. Unshakeable. The one people come to when they fall apart, precisely because we never fall apart.

The pastor who has unwavering faith. The therapist who's worked through all her issues. The nurse who can handle anything. The social worker who's seen it all and remains unmoved. The counselor whose life is a testament to perfectly applied clinical interventions.

This person doesn't exist. And the attempt to become this person is killing us.

Where the Myth Comes From

Cultural expectations. We live in a culture that values strength and despises weakness. We admire people who "have it all together" and dismiss those who struggle. Vulnerability is seen as failure, not courage.

Professional training. Many helping professions implicitly or explicitly teach emotional detachment as professionalism. "Don't let clients see you sweat." "Maintain boundaries." "Keep it clinical." These aren't inherently bad—we talked about healthy boundaries in Chapter 4—but they can morph into a belief that you should never have needs yourself.

Religious messaging. We've heard the sermons: "Cast your cares on the Lord." "The joy of the Lord is your strength." "Be anxious for nothing." All true and beautiful theology that somehow gets twisted into the message that struggling means you don't have enough faith.

Projection from others. People need you to be strong. They need you to be the stable one, the wise one, the one who has answers. So they project their need for a savior onto you, and you unconsciously accept the role.

Our own woundedness. Sometimes we entered helping professions because we're trying to heal ourselves vicariously. We become the helper we wish we'd had. We prove our worth through being strong for others. We avoid our own pain by focusing on others' pain.

All of this creates a perfect storm: You believe you must be strong, people expect you to be strong, and you're terrified of anyone discovering that you're

not actually strong at all—you're just as broken, needy, and struggling as the people you're helping.

The Cost of the Myth

This myth doesn't just create internal pressure—it actively harms you and the people you serve.

It isolates you. You can't be honest about your struggles because you're supposed to have it all together. So you perform strength while dying inside. You have no one to turn to because you're the person everyone turns to.

It creates shame. Every time you struggle, you interpret it as failure. You're not just sad—you're a terrible Christian who should have more faith. You're not just anxious—you're a fraud who has no business counseling others about anxiety.

It prevents you from getting help. You can't seek therapy because therapists aren't supposed to need therapy. You can't ask for prayer because spiritual leaders aren't supposed to be weak. You can't be vulnerable because helpers aren't supposed to have needs.

It perpetuates the cycle. When you maintain this image, you implicitly teach others that wholeness means never struggling. You model hiding rather than healing. You reinforce the very shame that keeps people from getting help.

It makes you less effective. Counterintuitively, your refusal to acknowledge your own woundedness actually diminishes your ability to help others. You can't take people where you haven't been yourself. If you haven't done the work of facing your own pain, you'll unconsciously avoid taking clients to those deep places.

The Truth Hidden in Plain Sight

Here's what we need to reckon with: **Every person in the helping professions is a wounded healer.**

Every. Single. One.

There are no unwounded helpers. We've all been shaped by pain, loss, trauma, disappointment. We've all got our issues, our triggers, our unhealed places. The question isn't whether you're wounded—it's whether you're aware of your wounds and actively engaged in your own healing process.

Paul understood this better than most of us: "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 may 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).

Read that carefully. God comforts us in our affliction not just for our sake, but so that we can comfort others. Our wounds—when surrendered to God and allowed to heal—become the very means by which we minister to others.

You're not disqualified by your woundedness. You're commissioned through it.

But here's the crucial distinction: **Healed wounds minister. Unhealed wounds harm.**

The Difference Between Healed and Bleeding Wounds

Not all wounds are created equal. Or more accurately, not all wounds are in the same stage of healing.

Think about physical wounds. When you first get cut, it's actively bleeding. It needs immediate attention. You can't ignore it or pretend it's not there—it's literally leaking.

Then it scabs over. It's healing, but still tender. Touch it and it hurts. Bump it and it might start bleeding again. It's better than it was, but it's not healed yet.

Eventually, it becomes a scar. Fully healed. You can touch it without pain. It's part of your story, a mark of something you survived, but it doesn't bleed anymore.

The same is true of emotional and spiritual wounds.

Bleeding Wounds

These are fresh, raw, actively painful wounds that you haven't begun to process.

Signs you're ministering from a bleeding wound:

- You become emotionally flooded when clients share certain stories
- You over-identify with specific types of pain because they mirror your own
- You give advice that's really about your own unresolved issues, not their situation
- You use your work to avoid dealing with your own pain
- You need people to heal so you can feel better about your own wounds
- You share your story compulsively, without discretion, because you need to process it

You cannot minister effectively from bleeding wounds. You need help yourself first.

This doesn't mean you're disqualified from helping forever. It means you need to step back from that particular area until you've done some healing work. A surgeon wouldn't operate with an open wound on his hand—it would contaminate the patient. The same principle applies emotionally and spiritually.

Scabbed Wounds

These are wounds in active healing. You're working on them—in therapy, spiritual direction, with trusted friends. They're not raw anymore, but they're not fully healed either.

Signs you're ministering from a scabbed wound:

- You can engage with similar pain in others without being overwhelmed
- But you need to be careful and intentional about it

- You process regularly with a therapist or supervisor
- You're aware of your triggers and can manage them
- You can help others without needing their healing to validate your own
- You share your story occasionally and appropriately, with clear boundaries

You can minister from scabbed wounds—carefully and with support. Many of us will spend most of our ministry lives in this category. We're not perfectly whole, but we're actively healing. We're aware of our wounds and tending them while also helping others.

This requires ongoing intentionality: regular therapy, spiritual direction, good supervision, honest friendships. You can do this work, but you need support structures in place.

Scarred Wounds

These are wounds that have fully healed. They're part of your story, but they don't control you anymore.

Signs you're ministering from a scarred wound:

- You can talk about it without becoming emotionally dysregulated
- You've processed it thoroughly—the emotions, the meaning, the impact
- You've forgiven (where appropriate) and released bitterness
- You can hear others' similar stories without making it about you
- You share your story strategically to help others, not compulsively to process your own pain
- You've integrated the wound into your larger narrative of God's faithfulness

Scarred wounds are your most powerful ministry tool. When you've been through darkness and come out the other side, when you've experienced

God's comfort in affliction, you have something to offer others that textbook knowledge can never provide: the testimony of lived experience.

This is what Paul meant: "We may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

Your scars tell a story of survival, resilience, healing, and grace. They're evidence that pain doesn't have the last word. They're proof that God redeems.

Why Healers Need Healing Too

If we're going to minister from scars rather than bleeding wounds, we have to actually do the work of healing. And that means we need help—the same kind of help we offer to others.

Personal Therapy

Let me be direct: **If you're in a helping profession, you need your own therapist.**

Not "it would be nice if you had one." Not "consider getting one if things get really bad." You need one. Regularly. Consistently.

Here's why:

You need a place to process your own pain. You spend all day holding space for others' pain. Where do you take yours? If you don't have a designated place, you'll either stuff it (which leads to breakdown) or inappropriately dump it on clients, friends, or family.

You need someone monitoring your mental health. You wouldn't trust a dentist who never had his own teeth checked. Why would you trust a therapist who never addresses her own mental health? You have blind spots. You need someone helping you see them.

You need to experience what you're asking others to experience. If you've never been in therapy yourself, you don't really understand what it feels like to

be vulnerable with a stranger, to revisit painful memories, to do the hard work of change. Experiencing it yourself makes you a better helper.

You need ongoing training in self-awareness. Therapy isn't just about fixing problems—it's about increasing self-awareness. The more you understand yourself, the less your unconscious stuff will contaminate your work with others.

You need someone who can challenge you. Everyone else in your life either sees you as the expert or needs you to be strong. Your therapist is the one person who can say, "That's bullshit and you know it" without you shutting down.

Spiritual Direction

In addition to therapy, Christian caregivers need spiritual direction—someone who helps you pay attention to what God is doing in your life.

Spiritual directors aren't therapists and they're not pastors. They're trained to help you notice God's presence, movement, and invitation in your everyday life. They help you distinguish between your voice, the enemy's voice, and God's voice.

Why you need spiritual direction:

Your relationship with God can't just be professional. If the only time you engage Scripture is when you're preparing to teach, and the only time you pray is when you're praying for others, your soul is starving. Spiritual direction creates space for God to minister to you, not just through you.

You need help untangling your identity from your role. Spiritual directors help you remember who you are beyond what you do. They call you back to your belovedness when you've lost yourself in busyness or accomplishment.

You need discernment about your calling. Sometimes God is inviting you to something new, and you need someone outside your situation to help you hear His voice clearly.

You need someone praying for you. Your spiritual director prays for you between sessions. Someone is regularly bringing your name before God, interceding for you, holding you in prayer.

Confession and Accountability

James writes: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

Healing comes through confession. Not just confession to God in private—though that's essential—but confession to trusted others.

Why confession matters:

Secrets keep us sick. The things we hide have power over us. When we bring them into the light, their power diminishes. "What we can't confess, we can't heal" (Richard Rohr).

We need witnesses to our humanity. When you confess to someone and they don't reject you, you experience grace in a way that changes you. You learn viscerally that you're loved not despite your flaws but right in the middle of them.

Accountability creates structure for growth. Some patterns in our lives won't change without external accountability. Having someone who asks the hard questions, who knows your struggles, who checks in regularly—this matters.

Who should you confess to?

Not your clients. Not people you're helping. They need you in a different role.

Find:

- A trusted friend who's far enough outside your ministry context that they can be honest with you
- A small group or accountability partner specifically for mutual confession

- A priest or pastor if your tradition includes formal confession
- Your therapist (not confession in the sacramental sense, but honest disclosure)

Regular Supervision

If you're in a clinical profession, supervision might be required. But even if it's not, you need it.

Supervision is where you bring difficult cases, ethical dilemmas, countertransference issues, and questions about your work. Someone with more experience helps you see what you're missing.

Good supervision includes:

- Case consultation on specific clients or situations
- Processing your emotional reactions to your work
- Identifying patterns in your practice that might indicate your own issues
- Checking for ethical boundaries
- Professional development and continued learning

Don't see supervision as evaluation or judgment. See it as essential support for doing good work.

Why We Resist Getting Help

If all this is so important, why do we resist it so strongly?

Pride. We believe we should be able to handle our own issues. Seeking help feels like admitting weakness or failure.

Fear. We're afraid of what we might discover if we look too closely. We're afraid of being overwhelmed by our own pain. We're afraid of losing control.

Shame. We've internalized the message that needing help is shameful. That strong people don't struggle. That spiritual people have it all together.

Practical barriers. Therapy is expensive. Time is limited. Finding someone who understands your particular context is hard.

Concerns about confidentiality. Especially in small ministry contexts, people worry about privacy. What if your therapist knows someone in your church? What if word gets out that you're struggling?

All these resistances are understandable. But none of them are more important than your health, your calling, and your ability to serve effectively long-term.

God Ministers Through Surrendered Wounds

Here's the paradox at the heart of Christian ministry: **God's power is perfected in weakness.**

Paul learned this the hard way. He had a "thorn in the flesh"—some unspecified struggle that tormented him. He begged God three times to remove it.

God said no.

"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insecurities, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

This is staggering theology. God doesn't just work despite our weakness—He works through it. His power is made perfect in it.

What This Means for Wounded Healers

Your wounds are not disqualifications—they're credentials. Not because woundedness itself is valuable, but because surrendered, healing wounds demonstrate God's redemptive power in ways nothing else can.

Your weakness is not a liability—it's an opportunity. When you're honest about your struggles, you create space for God to show up in power. When you pretend to have it all together, you leave no room for God to work.

Your scars are not shameful—they're glorious. They tell the story of where you've been and how God brought you through. They're evidence of resurrection power.

The Key Word: Surrendered

Notice I keep saying "surrendered wounds." This is crucial.

Unsurrendered wounds become weapons. When we hold onto bitterness, refuse to forgive, won't do the work of healing, our wounds don't minister—they harm. We hurt people from our own unhealed places. We project our pain onto them. We use them to meet needs that only God should meet.

Surrendered wounds become vessels of grace. When we bring our pain to God, when we let Him heal us, when we do the hard work of processing and releasing, something miraculous happens: Our pain becomes a means of ministry. Our struggles become sources of empathy. Our scars become signs of hope.

This is what it means to let God minister through your wounds:

- You've done the work of healing
- You've surrendered outcomes to God
- You've forgiven where necessary
- You've processed the emotions
- You've integrated the experience into your larger story of God's faithfulness
- You're willing to share when appropriate, not compulsively
- You trust God to use your story for His purposes

Testimony vs. Trauma Dumping

This brings us to an important distinction: When is it appropriate to share your own story with the people you're helping?

The answer: It depends on whether you're offering testimony or trauma dumping.

Testimony

Testimony is sharing your story of God's faithfulness in a way that serves the other person.

Characteristics of healthy testimony:

- **It's appropriate to the context.** You share because it genuinely helps them, not because you need to process.
- **It's brief and focused.** You share enough to make the point, then return focus to them.
- **It's about God more than you.** The emphasis is on what God did, not on the details of your suffering.
- **It's from a healed place.** You can share without becoming emotionally dysregulated.
- **It offers hope.** Your story demonstrates that healing is possible, that God is faithful, that they're not alone.
- **It doesn't overshadow their story.** You don't make the session about you. You share strategically to serve them, then move back to their experience.

Example of healthy testimony:

Client shares about struggling with depression and feeling like they'll never get better.

"I appreciate you trusting me with that. I want you to know—not to make this about me, but to offer you hope—I've been in that dark place too. I remember thinking the heaviness would never lift. But through treatment, medication,

therapy, and time, it did. I'm not saying your journey will look like mine, but I want you to know recovery is possible. God was faithful to me even when I couldn't feel Him, and I believe He'll be faithful to you too. Now tell me more about what the darkness feels like for you..."

Brief. Focused. Hopeful. Then immediately back to the client.

Trauma Dumping

Trauma dumping is unloading your unprocessed pain onto others in a way that serves you, not them.

Characteristics of trauma dumping:

- **It's about your need to process.** You share because you're still working through it, and you're using them as your therapist.
- **It's detailed and lengthy.** You get lost in your story, sharing far more than is helpful or necessary.
- **It centers you.** Their story becomes a springboard for your story. You take up time and space that should be theirs.
- **It's emotionally dysregulated.** You become upset while sharing. Your unprocessed emotions flood the space.
- **It burdens them.** They end up comforting you or managing your emotions instead of working on their own healing.
- **It creates confusion about roles.** They're not sure if they're the client or the therapist. You've made them responsible for you.

Example of trauma dumping:

Client shares about struggling with depression.

"Oh my gosh, I totally understand. I've struggled with depression my whole life. It's been so hard. Just last week I was having this really rough day and I couldn't get out of bed and my spouse was so frustrated with me and we got in this huge fight... [continues for 10 minutes detailing personal struggles]... So

yeah, I know exactly what you're going through. Have you tried what I've been trying?"

Too long. Too detailed. Centers the helper. Makes the client responsible for the helper's feelings.

Guidelines for Sharing Your Story

If you're going to share from your own experience, use these guidelines:

Ask yourself: "Will sharing this help them, or do I just need to talk about it?" If it's the latter, take it to your therapist, not your client.

Keep it brief. A minute or two maximum. Share the essential point, then move on.

Stay regulated. If you can't share without getting emotional, it's not healed enough to share yet.

Make it about them. Use phrases like "I'm sharing this to offer you hope..." or "I mention this only because..." that clearly establish you're serving them, not processing for yourself.

Always return focus to them. Don't let your story become the center. Share, then immediately: "But let's come back to your experience. Tell me more about..."

When in doubt, don't. If you're not sure whether it would be helpful to share, err on the side of not sharing. You can always share later if needed, but you can't unshare.

Permission to Be Human

Let me say clearly what I hope has been implicit throughout this chapter:

You are allowed to be human.

You're allowed to struggle. To need help. To not have all the answers. To be in process. To have bad days. To need rest. To cry. To question. To doubt. To hurt.

You're allowed to be wounded. And you're allowed—expected, even—to seek healing.

This doesn't make you a fraud. It makes you human. And humans need help. All of us. Even those of us whose vocation involves helping others.

In fact, **the helpers who recognize their need for help are often the best helpers.** They have humility. They have empathy. They understand viscerally what they're asking of others. They know they're not the savior—just a fellow traveler who's a few steps ahead on the path.

A Different Kind of Strength

Our culture prizes a kind of strength that's really just invulnerability. An armor that lets nothing in and nothing out. A toughness that's really just numbness.

But that's not biblical strength.

Biblical strength is the willingness to be weak before God, to bring Him your wounds, to let Him heal you, to serve from that place of redeemed brokenness.

It's Paul saying, "When I am weak, then I am strong."

It's Jesus saying, "Apart from me you can do nothing."

It's David writing psalms that are raw with emotion—anger, grief, fear, doubt—and still calling God faithful.

This is the kind of strength that sustains ministry long-term. Not the strength that never breaks, but the strength that breaks, surrenders to God, heals, and rises to serve again.

The Invitation to Wholeness

Your wounds are not a disqualification. But they do require tending.

God is inviting you to wholeness—not perfection, but integration. To bring all of who you are—including the broken parts—into the light and let Him heal you.

This requires:

- Honesty about where you're wounded
- Willingness to get help
- Humility to receive what you've been giving
- Patience with the healing process
- Trust that God can use even your scars for His glory

You don't have to have it all together to be used by God. You just have to be willing to let Him put you back together.

And as He does—as you surrender your wounds to Him, as you walk through the healing process, as you let your scars tell His story—something beautiful happens:

Your wounds become your ministry. Your pain becomes your platform. Your scars become signs of hope for everyone else who's wounded and wondering if healing is possible.

This is the way of the wounded healer. Not perfect. Not invulnerable. But surrendered. Healing. And powerfully used by God precisely because of, not despite, the places where you've been broken.

Pause and Reflect:

This chapter calls for deep honesty. Take time with these questions.

1. Where are you on the spectrum between bleeding wound, scabbed wound, and scarred wound in the areas most relevant to your work? Be specific. What does this tell you about where you need to focus your healing efforts?
2. Do you have a therapist? A spiritual director? Someone who provides supervision or accountability? If not, what's stopping you? What would need to happen for you to get this support?

3. Think about the last time you shared your story in a professional context. Was it testimony or trauma dumping? How do you know?
4. Complete this sentence: "The wound I most need healing for is..." Then ask: "Who can I bring this to for help?"
5. What would it mean for you to truly believe that your wounds are not a disqualification, but can become—through God's redemption—your greatest qualification for ministry?

You are not disqualified. You are human. And God specializes in using broken, surrendered vessels to pour out His grace.

Will you let Him heal you so He can use even your scars for His glory?

Chapter 9

Knowing When to Step Back, Refer Out, or Rest

I knew I needed to quit six months before I actually did.

The signs were everywhere. I dreaded going to work. I snapped at my family over nothing. I stopped caring whether my clients got better. I fantasized constantly about different careers—anything that didn't involve listening to people's pain.

But I couldn't quit. Because quitting felt like failure. Like giving up. Like abandoning my calling.

So I stayed. And every day I stayed past when I should have left, I did more damage—to myself, to my family, and yes, to the people I was supposedly serving.

The breaking point came when a long-term client said, "You're not really here anymore, are you? I can tell. You're going through the motions, but you're not present."

She was right. And she deserved better than someone going through the motions.

That conversation finally gave me permission to do what I'd known for months I needed to do: I gave notice. I took a six-month sabbatical. And I began the painful work of discerning whether I needed to step back temporarily or step away permanently.

Looking back, I realize my biggest mistake wasn't that I needed to leave—it was that I stayed so long after I knew I should go. Because somewhere along the way, I'd conflated my role with my calling. I thought leaving my job meant abandoning what God had called me to.

But here's what I've learned since: **Your calling is from God. Your role is a vehicle for that calling. And sometimes God prunes the vehicle precisely to deepen the calling.**

When the Work Is No Longer Holy

There's a moment in every helper's life—sometimes many moments—when you need to ask yourself a hard question: **Is this work still holy?**

Not "Is this work important?" Yes, it's important. People need help. The work matters.

Not "Is this work hard?" Yes, it's hard. All meaningful work is hard. Difficulty alone isn't a reason to quit.

The question is: **Is this still a holy calling, or has it become an idol, an addiction, or a form of slow self-destruction dressed up as service?**

Signs the Work Is No Longer Holy

You're serving from depletion, not overflow. We talked about this in Chapter 5, but it bears repeating: If you're constantly giving from an empty well, something is wrong. You're not experiencing the life-giving flow Jesus promised. You're white-knuckling your way through, and that's not sustainable.

You resent the very people you're called to serve. A little irritation occasionally? Normal. But deep, pervasive resentment toward the people you're helping? That's a sign you've crossed a line. When you start seeing people as burdens rather than humans made in God's image, the work has stopped being holy.

You're hiding from God. When prayer feels impossible, when Scripture feels empty, when you're avoiding God because you know He'd call you to address what you're refusing to face—the work has become an obstacle between you and Him.

Your closest relationships are suffering significantly. If your spouse has stopped asking you to be present because you never are. If your kids have learned not to need you because you're never available. If your friends have given up trying to connect because you always cancel—something is deeply wrong.

You're medicating just to cope. If you need alcohol, prescription drugs, food, shopping, or any other substance or behavior just to get through the day—that's not holy work. That's addiction with a ministry veneer.

You've lost your "why." You can't remember why you started this work. You no longer feel connected to the sense of calling that brought you here. You're just going through the motions because you don't know what else to do.

You're causing harm. This is the hardest one to admit, but it's the most important. If you're so depleted, bitter, or checked out that you're actually harming the people you're supposed to be helping—you need to stop. Immediately.

The Difference Between Hard Seasons and Harmful Seasons

Here's where discernment gets tricky: Not every difficult season is a sign you should quit.

Sometimes the work is hard because you're learning and growing. Sometimes it's difficult because you're doing something that matters. Sometimes you feel depleted because you're genuinely in a demanding season, but with proper support and rest, you'll come through stronger.

How do you tell the difference between a hard season that requires perseverance and a harmful season that requires stepping back?

Hard seasons:

- Have an end point or hope of resolution
- Respond to rest and support
- Include moments of meaning and fulfillment amid the difficulty
- Challenge you to grow without destroying you
- Don't compromise your core values or integrity
- Don't systematically damage your most important relationships

Harmful seasons:

- Feel endless with no light at the end of the tunnel
- Don't improve even with rest and support
- Are characterized by complete meaninglessness and joylessness
- Break you down more than build you up
- Require you to violate your conscience or compromise your values
- Systematically destroy what matters most (health, family, faith)

Ask yourself:

- Am I being *refined* or *destroyed*?
- Am I being *stretched* or *broken*?
- Am I *learning* or *deteriorating*?
- Is this *shaping* me or *crushing* me?

If you're being refined, stretched, learning, and shaped—persevere with good support. If you're being destroyed, broken, deteriorating, and crushed—it's time to step back.

Emotional Overload Cloaked in "Service"

One of the most dangerous patterns in helping professions is continuing to work when you're emotionally overloaded, but convincing yourself it's faithfulness.

We disguise our inability to stop with spiritual language:

- "I'm just being faithful to my calling"
- "These people need me"
- "God will give me strength"
- "I'm taking up my cross"
- "This is what sacrifice looks like"

But what if it's not sacrifice? What if it's just stubbornness? What if it's pride disguised as humility? What if it's fear of facing what stepping back would reveal about you?

How to Recognize Overload Masked as Service

You use spiritual language to justify unhealthy patterns. Every time someone expresses concern about your pace, you respond with Bible verses about perseverance, faithfulness, or taking up your cross. You've weaponized Scripture to defend the indefensible.

You feel secretly martyred. Deep down, you resent how much you're giving. You keep mental tallies of your sacrifices. You feel unappreciated, taken for granted, used. But you keep going because that's what "good Christians" do.

You're in constant crisis mode. Everything is urgent. Everything is an emergency. You've normalized a level of intensity and chaos that isn't actually normal or necessary. You've become addicted to the adrenaline of crisis.

You can't imagine who you'd be without this work. Your entire identity is wrapped up in your role. The thought of stepping back terrifies you because you don't know who you are apart from being the helper, the fixer, the savior.

You've stopped asking God what He wants. You're just doing what you've always done, assuming God wants you to keep going. But when was the last time you actually asked Him? When was the last time you created space to hear His answer?

You're angry at people who have better boundaries than you. You judge colleagues who work fewer hours, take vacation, say no. Their health feels like an indictment of your lack of it, so you write them off as less committed, less faithful, less serious.

The Hard Truth

Sometimes what we call "service" is actually:

- **Avoidance.** We stay busy helping others to avoid facing our own issues.

- **Performance.** We work harder to prove our worth, earn love, or silence inner criticism.
- **Control.** We maintain our helper role because it gives us power, status, and a sense of importance.
- **Addiction.** We're hooked on being needed, and we need a fix.
- **Fear.** We're terrified of rest because we don't know what we'd find in the silence.

None of these are holy. And continuing in them doesn't honor God—it insults Him by suggesting His grace isn't sufficient, His call isn't clear, and His strength isn't enough.

Your Role Is Not Your Calling

This is the most liberating truth I can offer you: **Leaving a role does not mean leaving the call.**

Your calling is from God. It's His claim on your life, His purpose for you, His invitation to participate in His work. Your calling doesn't change just because your circumstances do.

Your role—your specific job, position, or ministry context—is simply the current vehicle through which you're living out that calling. And vehicles change.

The Difference

Calling: To bring hope and healing to hurting people

Role: As a therapist at this particular clinic

Calling: To shepherd God's people

Role: As senior pastor of this specific church

Calling: To care for the sick and suffering

Role: As an ICU nurse in this hospital

Calling: To advocate for the vulnerable

Role: As a social worker in this agency

Do you see the difference? The calling is deeper, broader, more fundamental. The role is specific, contextual, temporal.

God calls you to something. And then He directs you to live that out in specific ways at specific times. But the way might change. The time might end. The specific context might need to shift.

Leaving your job doesn't mean you're abandoning your calling—it might mean you're making space for a new expression of it.

When Role and Calling Diverge

Sometimes you can't live out your calling in your current role anymore. Not because you've changed, but because the role has.

Maybe:

- The organization's values have shifted and no longer align with yours
- The demands of the role have expanded beyond what's healthy or sustainable
- You've grown beyond this role and need new challenges
- The culture has become toxic and is compromising your integrity
- Your personal season has changed (new family responsibilities, health issues, etc.)
- God is clearly directing you elsewhere, even if you don't understand why

When role and calling diverge, you have to make a choice: Do you compromise your calling to maintain your role? Or do you honor your calling by releasing your role?

The answer should be obvious—but in practice, it's terrifying.

The Fear of Letting Go

Why is it so hard to leave a role even when we know we should?

Identity crisis. If I'm not a pastor/therapist/nurse/social worker, who am I? Our role has become our identity, and losing it feels like dying.

Financial fear. How will I pay my bills? Support my family? This is especially acute for those who've trained for years in a specific field.

Guilt about the people left behind. Who will help them if I leave? This is savior complex disguised as compassion. They managed before you, and they'll manage after you.

Shame about "quitting." We've internalized messages about perseverance, grit, not being a quitter. Leaving feels like failure.

Pressure from others. People have expectations. They'll be disappointed, confused, maybe even angry. The thought of facing that is overwhelming.

Loss of purpose. If I'm not doing this work, what's my purpose? We've conflated our work with our worth.

All these fears are understandable. But none of them are good reasons to stay in a role that's killing you.

The Practice of Discernment

So how do you actually discern whether you should stay or go? Here's a framework.

Step 1: Create Space

You can't discern clearly in the middle of chaos. You need space—physical, mental, emotional, spiritual—to hear God.

This might mean:

- Taking a few days away for silent retreat
- Scheduling regular time with a spiritual director
- Reducing your workload temporarily to create margin

- Taking a sabbatical if possible
- Stepping back from additional commitments to focus on this question

Don't try to discern on the run. Slow down. Get quiet. Make space.

Step 2: Get Honest

Bring brutal honesty before God:

- Why am I really staying? What am I afraid of losing?
- What's the cost of staying? To me? To my family? To my relationship with God?
- Am I serving from calling or from compulsion?
- What would I do if I weren't afraid?
- Am I avoiding something by staying busy with this?

Write it down. Say it out loud. Don't spiritualize or soften it. Just be honest.

Step 3: Seek Wise Counsel

Don't discern alone. Bring trusted people into the conversation:

- A therapist who can help you see patterns
- A spiritual director who can help you hear God
- A mentor who knows you and your calling
- Close friends who will tell you the truth
- Your spouse or family members who see the cost

Ask them directly: "Do you think I should stay in this role? Why or why not?"

And then—this is crucial—actually listen to their answers. Don't argue. Don't defend. Just listen.

Step 4: Look for Confirmation

God rarely speaks through just one voice. Look for themes that emerge across multiple sources:

- What do multiple people keep saying?
- What does Scripture seem to highlight as you read?
- What keeps coming up in prayer?
- What do circumstances seem to be indicating?

Pay attention to patterns. God often confirms His direction through multiple witnesses.

Step 5: Make a Decision and Test It

At some point, you need to make a decision—even if it's tentative.

Say, "I think God is leading me to [stay/take a sabbatical/leave/step into a different role]."

Then test it:

- **Does it bring peace?** Not the absence of fear, but deep soul-level peace that comes from alignment with God.
- **Does it align with Scripture?** Not specific verses taken out of context, but the broader biblical story of how God works.
- **Is it confirmed by wise counsel?** Do the people who know you best affirm this direction?
- **Does it produce good fruit?** Peace, clarity, renewed energy, hope—or anxiety, confusion, dread?

If the answer you're testing produces peace, aligns with Scripture, is confirmed by counsel, and bears good fruit—move forward with confidence.

If it produces the opposite—revisit the decision.

Step 6: Move Forward in Faith

Once you've discerned, act. Don't wait for 100% certainty—you'll never have it. Move forward in faith, trusting that God will redirect you if needed.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

God is more committed to getting you where you need to be than you are. If you're genuinely seeking His will, He'll guide you—even if you get it wrong initially.

How to Refer Out

Sometimes the question isn't about leaving your role entirely—it's about knowing when a specific person needs someone else.

Referring out is one of the most important skills in helping professions. It's acknowledging limits, recognizing mismatches, and prioritizing the person's wellbeing over your ego.

When to Refer

You lack competence. They need expertise you don't have. This isn't a failure—it's honesty.

You're emotionally compromised. Their situation triggers your own unhealed wounds. You can't be objective. They need someone who can.

There's a conflict of interest. You know them in another context. The relationship is too close. Professional boundaries would be compromised.

They need a higher level of care. They're suicidal, psychotic, or otherwise beyond your scope of practice. This is about safety.

You've reached an impasse. You've been working together for months or years, and they're not making progress. Sometimes a fresh perspective is needed.

Your personalities don't mesh. Not every helper-client match works. Sometimes the chemistry just isn't there, and that's okay.

You're at capacity. You're maxed out and can't give them what they need. Better to refer than to do a half-hearted job.

How to Refer Well

Be honest but kind. "I think you'd be better served by someone who specializes in trauma/addiction/marriage counseling. Let me give you some names."

Don't make it about their deficiency. Frame it as you wanting them to get the best possible help, not as them being too difficult or too broken.

Provide specific referrals. Don't just say "find someone else." Give them names, numbers, resources.

Offer transition support. "I'm happy to meet once more to help you transition" or "I'm available by phone if you have questions about the referral."

Follow up if appropriate. Depending on the context, check in to make sure they connected with the referral.

Release them to God. After you've done your due diligence, pray for them and release them. They're not your responsibility anymore.

When People Push Back

Some people won't want to be referred. They'll insist you're the only one who can help them, that they don't want to start over with someone new.

This is flattering but manipulative. Stand firm.

"I understand this feels disappointing. But I truly believe you need [X] which I can't provide. I care about you too much to keep working with you when I know you'd be better served elsewhere."

You're not required to continue helping someone just because they want you to. If it's not in their best interest, referring out is the loving thing to do—even if they don't see it that way.

Seasons and Sabbaticals

Ecclesiastes offers wisdom that's both comforting and challenging:

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted... a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 3b-4).

There are seasons. And recognizing which season you're in is essential for navigating it well.

The Season of Planting

This is when you're starting something new. A new role, a new ministry, a new phase of calling. It's exciting but also exhausting. Everything requires energy because nothing is established yet.

What this season requires: Hard work, long hours, steep learning curves, grace for mistakes, patience with slow growth.

What will harm you: Comparing yourself to people in harvest season. Expecting immediate results. Refusing to invest because it feels too costly.

The Season of Growth

Things are established. You're competent. The work is bearing fruit. This can be the most satisfying season—you're good at what you do, and you see the impact.

What this season requires: Maintaining faithfulness, resisting complacency, continuing to develop your skills, avoiding the trap of coasting.

What will harm you: Taking success for granted. Overextending because "everything is working." Neglecting rest because you're finally seeing results.

The Season of Harvest

The fruit is abundant. You're at the peak of your effectiveness. People are being helped. God is moving. It's glorious.

What this season requires: Gratitude, humility, generosity, sharing what you've learned with others, celebrating without becoming prideful.

What will harm you: Believing it will last forever. Taking credit. Becoming so busy harvesting that you stop planting for the next season.

The Season of Pruning

This is the hardest season to recognize and the most painful to endure. But it's essential.

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:1-2).

Notice: He prunes branches that *are* bearing fruit. Pruning isn't punishment for failure—it's preparation for greater fruitfulness.

What pruning looks like:

- Loss of a role or position
- Forced rest due to illness or burnout
- Circumstances that strip away what you've relied on
- Relationships ending
- Opportunities closing
- Public failure or humiliation
- Extended seasons of obscurity

What this season requires: Surrender, trust, patience, willingness to let go, faith that God knows what He's doing even when you don't understand.

What will harm you: Resisting the pruning, trying to force your way back into harvest season, becoming bitter about what's been cut away, giving up on God because it feels like He's destroying you.

The truth about pruning: It feels like death. It looks like loss. But it's actually preparation for new life. God cuts away what's dead, what's become unfruitful, what's draining resources from what He wants to grow next.

If you're in a pruning season—and you might be if you're reading this chapter—you're not being punished. You're being prepared.

The Season of Winter

Sometimes you need to lie fallow. To rest completely. To have nothing visible happening while underground work takes place.

This is sabbatical season. Not just a week off, but extended rest where you're not producing, not serving, not being visible or fruitful.

What winter requires: Complete release of productivity, trust that God sustains what He's planted, patience to wait without knowing when spring will come, faith that what looks dead is actually resting.

What will harm you: Panicking about "wasted" time, trying to stay productive, refusing to rest fully, filling the space with new things instead of being still.

The Ministry of Stepping Back

Here's what we miss about stepping back: **Sometimes it is your ministry.**

Not your failure. Not your giving up. Your actual, Spirit-led, God-honoring ministry.

Maybe God is calling you to:

- Model healthy boundaries for a culture that glorifies burnout
- Show people that it's okay to say "I can't do this anymore"
- Demonstrate that faithfulness sometimes looks like surrender, not perseverance
- Make space for someone else who's supposed to be in this role now

- Prioritize your family in a way that honors your most important relationships
- Care for your own soul so you can return later with renewed capacity

What if your stepping back is the most faithful thing you could do right now?

What Stepping Back Teaches

It teaches you that you're not indispensable. The work continues. God raises up others. The world doesn't collapse.

It teaches you the difference between your calling and your role. You discover that you're still called even when you're not in a formal helping position.

It teaches you to receive. You have to let others care for you, support you, carry you for a while.

It teaches you dependence on God. You can't earn His love through productivity. You have to learn to rest in being His beloved.

It teaches you about resurrection. Things that feel like death become the birthplace of new life.

Permission to Stop

If you need to hear it, here it is:

You have permission to step back.

Permission to take a sabbatical. Permission to leave this role. Permission to refer people out. Permission to say "I can't do this anymore."

You're not weak. You're not a failure. You're not abandoning your calling.

You're a finite human being who's been asked to do infinite work. And you're finally admitting what's been true all along: You can't do it all. You weren't meant to.

God is not disappointed in you for having limits. He designed you with them. He gave you a body that needs rest, a soul that needs tending, a heart that can only hold so much.

Honoring those limits isn't unfaithfulness—it's wisdom. It's stewardship. It's trust that God is bigger than your capacity and His work will continue with or without you.

So if you need to step back, step back. If you need to refer out, refer out. If you need to rest, rest.

The calling will still be there when you're ready. And God will be faithful to guide you to the next right thing.

Pause and Reflect:

These questions require courage. But they might save your life.

1. If you're completely honest, is the work still holy? Or has it become something else?
2. What would your closest people (spouse, best friend, spiritual director) say about whether you should stay in your current role? Have you asked them? Are you willing to listen to their answer?
3. Complete this sentence: "I know I should step back, but I can't because..." Now read what you wrote. Are those reasons true, or are they fears?
4. What season are you in: planting, growth, harvest, pruning, or winter? What does that season require of you? Are you honoring it or resisting it?
5. If you knew God wouldn't be disappointed—if you knew He'd love you just as much and your calling would remain intact—would you step back? What does your answer reveal?

Remember: Seasons change. Pruning isn't permanent. Winter gives way to spring.

But you have to honor the season you're in, not the season you wish you were in.

Trust the Vinedresser. He knows what He's doing—even when it feels like He's cutting away everything that mattered.

Chapter 10

Community and Covering: You Were Never Meant to Do This Alone

I almost didn't make it.

Not because the work was too hard—though it was. Not because I wasn't called—I was. But because I tried to do it alone.

For years, I operated under the assumption that strength meant self-sufficiency. That being a good leader meant not needing anyone. That vulnerability was weakness and asking for help was admission of failure.

I had colleagues, but no real community. I had supervisors, but no mentors. I had people who reported to me, but no one I reported my soul to. I was surrounded by people but profoundly isolated.

And it was killing me.

The turning point came on an ordinary Tuesday. I was sitting in my office, staring at my computer screen, unable to remember why I'd opened the document in front of me. My hands were shaking. My chest felt tight. Everything felt impossible.

My phone rang. It was David, a colleague I'd been meeting with monthly for lunch—more social obligation than real friendship, or so I thought.

"Hey, I know we're not scheduled to meet until next week, but I had this strong sense I should call. You okay?"

I opened my mouth to say "I'm fine"—the lie I'd been telling everyone, including myself, for months. But what came out instead was: "No. I'm not okay. I don't think I can do this anymore."

What happened next changed everything.

David didn't give me advice. He didn't try to fix me. He didn't tell me to pray harder or have more faith. He simply said, "I'm coming over. You shouldn't be alone right now."

An hour later, I sat across from him in a coffee shop, finally telling the truth. About how empty I felt. How scared I was. How alone I'd been trying to carry everything.

And David did something I'll never forget: He cried. Not out of pity, but out of recognition. "I know exactly what you're describing," he said. "I've been there. And I can tell you—you don't have to do this alone. In fact, you *can't* do this alone. None of us can."

That conversation was the beginning of something I'd been missing my entire ministry: **real community.**

The Triune Model

Here's something we say we believe but rarely live like we believe: **God Himself exists in community.**

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three persons, one God. Perfect unity. Mutual love. Eternal relationship. The Trinity is not a solitary God who occasionally reaches out to creation. The Trinity is relationship itself, community at the very heart of reality.

And we are made in the image of this Triune God.

Which means **we were created for community. It's not optional—it's essential to who we are.**

What the Trinity Teaches Us About Community

Interdependence is strength, not weakness. The Father, Son, and Spirit are not diminished by their dependence on one another—they're glorified in it. Jesus said, "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19). This wasn't weakness—it was perfect strength operating in perfect relationship.

Each person has distinct roles without hierarchy. The Father sends, the Son goes, the Spirit empowers. Different functions, equal glory. None is lesser. None is independent. All work together in perfect harmony.

Mutual submission and honor. Jesus submits to the Father's will. The Spirit glorifies the Son. The Father exalts the Son. This isn't domination—it's mutual submission born of love.

Perfect communication and unity. "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). There's transparency, intimacy, complete knowledge of one another. No secrets, no posturing, no performing.

Life flows from relationship. The Trinity doesn't just model community—they are community. And from that community flows all of creation, all of redemption, all of life itself.

What This Means for Helpers

If the Trinity is the model, then our attempts at self-sufficient ministry are not just unwise—they're actually contrary to the nature of God.

When you try to do this work alone, you're not being strong. You're not being spiritual. You're not protecting others from being burdened.

You're acting as if you're not made in the image of the Triune God.

God Himself operates in community. Jesus Himself sent the disciples out two by two (Mark 6:7). The early church operated in plurality of leadership, mutual accountability, shared burdens.

Isolation isn't faithfulness. It's pride disguised as humility. It's fear disguised as strength.

You were never meant to do this alone.

Why We Try Anyway

If community is so essential, why do we keep trying to function independently?

We've been taught that needing others is weakness. Western culture—and Western Christianity—glorifies the self-made individual. The lone ranger. The strong leader who doesn't need anyone. We've absorbed these values even though they contradict the gospel.

We're afraid of being known. Real community requires vulnerability. It means letting people see our struggles, our doubts, our failures. That's terrifying when we've built our identity around having it together.

We don't want to burden others. Helpers are especially prone to this. We convince ourselves that everyone else is already carrying enough—we can't add our stuff to their load.

We've been burned before. Maybe you tried to be vulnerable once and it backfired. Someone used your confession against you. A confidence was betrayed. Trust was broken. So you vowed never to risk it again.

We're competing instead of connecting. Ministry culture often feels competitive. Who has the largest church, the busiest practice, the most successful program? In that environment, admitting struggle feels like admitting defeat.

We genuinely believe we're different. We tell ourselves our situation is unique, our struggles are too specific, our calling is too isolating for others to understand. So we convince ourselves we have to go it alone.

But here's the truth: **Every single one of these reasons is a lie designed to keep you isolated, vulnerable, and ultimately destroyed.**

The Elements of Healthy Community

Not all community is created equal. Simply being around people doesn't mean you have real community. What does healthy community for helpers actually look like?

1. Mutual Vulnerability

Healthy community isn't hierarchical in terms of who's allowed to need what. It's mutual. Everyone is both giver and receiver.

This looks like:

- Sharing your struggles, not just your successes
- Asking for help without apologizing for needing it

- Being honest about where you're struggling professionally and personally
- Letting others see you on bad days, not just polished Sundays

This doesn't look like:

- One person always being the helper and others always being helped
- Performing strength while hiding need
- Only sharing surface-level "acceptable" struggles
- Maintaining the facade that you have everything figured out

The test: Can you cry in front of these people? Can you admit you're struggling without fear of judgment? Can you say "I don't know" or "I messed up" without it changing how they see you?

2. Truth-Telling Love

Real community tells you the truth—even when it's uncomfortable. But it does so in love, not judgment.

This looks like:

- Friends who will say, "I'm worried about you. You're not yourself lately."
- Colleagues who will point out when you're overextended
- Mentors who will ask hard questions: "Are you sure you should take on one more thing?"
- People who love you enough to risk your displeasure by telling you what you need to hear

This doesn't look like:

- Everyone affirming everything you do
- No one willing to challenge you or offer correction
- Gossip disguised as concern

- Harsh criticism without relationship or compassion

The test: Do these people love you enough to risk making you uncomfortable? Will they tell you when you're wrong, when you're heading toward burnout, when you need to make a change?

3. Confidentiality and Safety

You can't be vulnerable without safety. Healthy community protects what's shared.

This looks like:

- What's said here stays here (unless there's a safety concern)
- No sharing others' struggles as "prayer requests"
- No using vulnerability against someone later
- Trust that your confessions won't become gossip

This doesn't look like:

- Information shared in confidence showing up in public conversations
- Using someone's weakness to gain advantage
- Breaking trust and then asking for more vulnerability
- Weaponizing confession

The test: Has anyone in this community ever violated your trust? If so, has it been addressed and repaired? Do you genuinely feel safe sharing your real struggles?

4. Non-Anxious Presence

Healthy community doesn't panic when you're struggling. People can hold space for your pain without needing to fix you immediately.

This looks like:

- Sitting with you in difficulty without rushing to solutions

- Allowing you to process without judging the pace
- Being comfortable with ambiguity and not-knowing
- Offering presence more than advice

This doesn't look like:

- Everyone scrambling to fix you
- People becoming anxious about your anxiety
- Friends who can't tolerate your struggle and need you to be okay for their sake
- Pressure to be "over it" on someone else's timeline

The test: Can you be in process without people pressuring you to be finished?
Can you struggle without everyone else spiraling?

5. Practical Support

Real community doesn't just offer thoughts and prayers—it shows up with meals, childcare, and tangible help.

This looks like:

- People bringing dinner when you're overwhelmed
- Someone offering to cover a shift or a session
- Friends who help with practical tasks when you're depleted
- Community that gives not just emotional support but actual assistance

This doesn't look like:

- Everyone saying "Let me know if you need anything" but no one actually doing anything
- Spiritual platitudes without practical help
- Expecting you to manage everything alone while they pray for you from a distance

The test: When you've been in crisis, has this community shown up practically? Or just offered vague support from afar?

Mentorship: Learning From Those Ahead

One crucial form of community is mentorship—relationship with someone further along the path who can guide you.

Good mentors are worth their weight in gold. They can help you avoid mistakes they've already made, navigate challenges they've already faced, and see patterns you're too close to see.

What to Look for in a Mentor

Experience relevant to your context. They've walked a similar path and have wisdom to offer from that journey.

Emotional and spiritual health. They've done their own work. They're not using you to meet their needs or living vicariously through you.

Willingness to be honest. They'll tell you the truth, even when it's hard to hear. They care more about your growth than your approval.

No agenda for you. They want to help you become who God's calling you to be, not a clone of them or a fulfillment of their vision.

Boundaries. They have healthy boundaries in their own life and will help you develop yours.

Integration. Their personal life and professional life are integrated. They're not one person in public and another in private.

What Mentorship Provides

Perspective. When you're in the middle of a situation, you can't see clearly. Mentors offer outside perspective from someone who's been there.

Permission. Sometimes you need someone with authority and experience to give you permission to do what you already know you need to do—say no, step back, make a change.

Wisdom about landmines. They can warn you about mistakes before you make them, based on their own experience.

Normalization. "What you're experiencing is normal. I felt that too. Here's what helped me." This is gold for helpers who often think they're the only ones struggling.

Advocacy. A good mentor advocates for you, champions you, opens doors, makes introductions.

Challenge. They push you to grow, to take risks, to step into things that scare you but that God is calling you toward.

How to Find a Mentor

Pray specifically. Ask God to bring the right person into your path. Be specific about what kind of mentorship you need.

Look around your existing network. Who do you already admire? Who's living the kind of life you want to live in 10-20 years?

Be direct. Most mentorship relationships happen because someone asks. "I really respect how you [specific thing]. Would you be willing to meet with me quarterly to offer guidance?"

Make it easy for them. Offer to come to them. Suggest specific time frames (quarterly, not weekly). Be clear about what you're asking for.

Don't expect perfection. You're not looking for someone who has it all figured out. You're looking for someone a few steps ahead who's willing to share what they've learned.

Be willing to start informal. Not every mentor relationship needs to be formal. Sometimes the best mentorship happens organically through consistent conversation.

Supervision: Accountability for Your Work

Mentorship focuses on you as a person. Supervision focuses on your work. Both are essential.

Supervision is where you bring your cases, your questions, your ethical dilemmas, your struggles with specific clients or situations. It's where someone with more experience helps you do better work.

Why Supervision Matters

It protects the people you serve. You're dealing with vulnerable people. You need oversight to make sure you're not causing harm through incompetence, blind spots, or your own unhealed wounds.

It protects you. Supervision helps you avoid burnout, boundary violations, ethical failures, and other pitfalls that can destroy your career and your soul.

It improves your skills. Even the best practitioners need feedback, coaching, and continued learning. Supervision is ongoing professional development.

It provides emotional processing. Carrying others' stories is heavy. Supervision gives you a place to process that weight with someone who understands.

It offers accountability. You're less likely to drift into unhealthy patterns when someone is regularly asking about your work.

What Good Supervision Includes

Regular meetings. Not just when there's a crisis. Consistent, scheduled time to review your work.

Case consultation. Bringing specific situations for feedback, brainstorming, and guidance.

Processing countertransference. Exploring your emotional reactions to clients/situations and what they reveal about you.

Ethical oversight. Discussing boundary issues, confidentiality concerns, and ethical dilemmas.

Professional development. Identifying areas for growth and creating plans to address them.

Personal check-in. How are you doing? Not just your work, but you as a person.

Finding Good Supervision

In some fields (counseling, social work), supervision is required. In others (pastoral ministry), it's often neglected.

If your role doesn't provide supervision:

- Seek it independently through professional organizations
- Form peer supervision groups with colleagues
- Hire a consultant or coach
- Find an experienced practitioner willing to meet with you regularly

Don't skip this. It's too important.

Team Culture: Creating Safety Together

If you work as part of a team or staff, the culture of that team profoundly impacts your wellbeing and effectiveness.

Healthy team cultures are characterized by:

Psychological Safety

Team members can take risks, make mistakes, ask questions, and share concerns without fear of humiliation or punishment.

This looks like:

- Mistakes are treated as learning opportunities, not occasions for shame
- Questions are welcomed, not seen as challenges to authority
- Disagreement is encouraged as part of good decision-making
- Failure is normalized as part of growth

This doesn't look like:

- Fear of speaking up because you might be mocked or dismissed
- Pretending to have answers you don't have
- Hiding mistakes instead of learning from them
- Yes-people who never challenge anything

Clear Communication

Expectations are explicit. Feedback is regular and constructive. There are no games or hidden agendas.

This looks like:

- Job expectations are clear and documented
- Feedback happens regularly, not just at annual reviews
- Conflicts are addressed directly, not through passive-aggressive behavior
- Changes are communicated clearly and promptly

This doesn't look like:

- Vague expectations and then criticism for not meeting undefined standards
- Feedback given as criticism with no path forward
- Information withheld as power play
- Important changes announced last-minute or not at all

Shared Values

The team is aligned on core values and operates from them consistently.

This looks like:

- Values are articulated and genuinely lived
- Decisions are made in alignment with stated values

- When values are violated, it's addressed
- Everyone holds everyone accountable to shared commitments

This doesn't look like:

- Nice-sounding values on the wall that no one actually follows
- Leadership operating by different rules than everyone else
- Values applied inconsistently depending on who's involved
- No one willing to call out when values are compromised

Mutual Support

Team members genuinely care for one another and help carry each other's loads.

This looks like:

- Celebrating each other's wins
- Covering for each other in crisis
- Asking how people are really doing
- Offering practical help, not just thoughts and prayers

This doesn't look like:

- Competition instead of collaboration
- Everyone for themselves
- Schadenfreude when someone struggles
- Isolation even though you work together

Healthy Conflict

Disagreement is normal and productive, not destructive.

This looks like:

- Conflict addressed directly and promptly
- Disagreement about ideas without attacks on people
- Ability to disagree and still respect each other
- Conflict resolution processes that actually work

This doesn't look like:

- Conflict avoided until it explodes
- Personal attacks disguised as feedback
- Grudges held indefinitely
- No way to resolve disagreements constructively

When the Workplace Is Toxic

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, you find yourself in a toxic workplace or ministry environment.

This is painful, complicated, and requires wisdom to navigate. Because sometimes the problem isn't just difficult—it's destructive.

Signs of Toxicity

Chronic dysfunction treated as normal. Crisis is constant. Chaos is the operating mode. Everyone's exhausted, but it's just "the way things are."

Abuse of power. Leaders use their position to manipulate, control, or exploit. There's no accountability for those in authority.

Lack of boundaries. Expectations are unreasonable and unending. Saying no is treated as betrayal. Work-life balance is mocked as weakness.

Gaslighting. Your legitimate concerns are dismissed as you being too sensitive, not committed enough, or spiritually immature. You're made to doubt your own perception of reality.

Scapegoating. There's always someone being blamed for everything. The target rotates, but there's always a villain.

Information control. Leadership operates in secrecy. Decisions are made without explanation. Asking questions is treated as insubordination.

Financial or sexual misconduct. Money is mishandled. Inappropriate relationships are ignored or covered up. Power is used for exploitation.

No path for concerns. There's no safe way to raise issues. Whistleblowers are punished. Problems are buried, not addressed.

The Spiritual Toll of Toxic Environments

Working in toxicity damages you spiritually in specific ways:

It distorts your image of God. When leaders claiming to represent God abuse power, it warps how you see God Himself.

It erodes your trust. If you can't trust your spiritual leaders, it becomes hard to trust anyone—including God.

It creates shame. You internalize the message that you're not good enough, committed enough, faithful enough. Your soul becomes convinced you're the problem.

It kills your calling. What started as vibrant call becomes obligation, drudgery, even revulsion. The toxicity poisons the very thing God called you to.

It breeds cynicism. You become bitter about ministry, suspicious of all leaders, skeptical that healthy Christian community even exists.

What to Do When You're in Toxicity

Name it. Stop making excuses for the dysfunction. Call it what it is—toxic, unhealthy, potentially abusive.

Document. Keep records of concerning incidents, conversations, decisions. If you ever need to report or leave, you'll have documentation.

Find outside support. You need people outside the toxic system to help you maintain perspective. A therapist who understands organizational trauma. Friends who aren't involved. A spiritual director who can help you process.

Set boundaries where possible. Even in toxic systems, there may be places you can create healthy limits. Do what you can to protect yourself.

Report if appropriate. If there's misconduct—financial, sexual, or otherwise—report it through proper channels. Denominational structures, licensing boards, law enforcement, depending on the situation.

Consider whether to stay or leave. This is the hardest question. Sometimes you can stay and work for change. Sometimes staying means becoming complicit. You need wisdom and outside counsel to discern which is which.

If you leave, grieve well. Leaving a toxic environment is often traumatic even when it's the right choice. You'll need to process the loss, the betrayal, the disappointment. Don't minimize this or rush it.

Don't let it destroy your calling. The toxicity of one environment doesn't invalidate your calling. God is still faithful even when leaders aren't. Healthy ministry contexts exist—don't let one bad experience convince you otherwise.

When to Leave

You should seriously consider leaving when:

- The environment is damaging your mental, physical, or spiritual health
- You're being asked to compromise your integrity or values
- There's abuse happening and no accountability
- You've tried to address concerns and been punished for it
- Staying requires you to participate in harm to others
- Your family is suffering significantly because of the toxicity

Staying in toxicity hoping to fix it from within is noble—until it destroys you. Sometimes the most faithful thing you can do is leave and let God deal with the system you can't change.

Two Are Better Than One

Ecclesiastes offers profound wisdom about community:

"Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

What This Passage Teaches

Shared labor is more fruitful. Working together produces better results than working alone. The reward is greater.

Shared burden is survivable. When you fall—not if, but when—you need someone to help you up. Without community, you stay down.

Shared warmth sustains. There are cold seasons in ministry. You need people to keep you warm—to remind you of truth, hope, and God's faithfulness when you can't feel it yourself.

Shared strength provides protection. The enemy attacks isolated sheep. When you're connected to others, you have defense you don't have alone.

A threefold cord. Two are better than one, but three is even stronger. When your relationships are bound together in Christ—you, another person, and God at the center—you have strength that's "not quickly broken."

The Exhortation

The writer of Hebrews knew we'd be tempted to isolate. So he wrote this direct command:

"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24-25).

This isn't a suggestion. It's a command. Don't neglect meeting together. Don't isolate. Don't try to do this alone.

What This Requires of You

Show up. Even when you don't feel like it. Even when you're tired. Even when it would be easier to stay home. Show up to your small group, your peer consultation, your mentorship meeting.

Be honest. Don't perform. Don't pretend. Bring your real self—struggles and all. Community can't help what they can't see.

Receive care. Let people love you. Let them bring you meals, pray for you, sit with you. Being able to receive is as important as being able to give.

Offer care. Pay attention to others. Notice when they're struggling. Ask the hard questions. Show up for them.

Stay committed. Community takes time to develop. Don't bail when it gets uncomfortable. Real community is built through staying, even through difficulty.

A Final Word About Isolation

If you've been doing this work alone, know this: **It's not too late to change.**

You don't have to continue in isolation just because that's how you've been operating. You can reach out. You can build community. You can find mentors, establish supervision, create support systems.

Yes, it's vulnerable. Yes, it's scary. Yes, it requires admitting you need help.

But the alternative—continuing alone until you break—is far worse.

God created you for community. The Trinity models it. Scripture commands it. Your soul needs it.

And there are people out there who need what you have to offer—not just your professional help, but your presence in mutual community. People who would

be honored to walk alongside you, to know you, to carry your burdens with you.

You just have to be willing to let them.

Pause and Reflect:

This is where you actually have to do something.

1. Take inventory: Do you have:

- Real community where you can be vulnerable?
- A mentor?
- Regular supervision?
- Healthy team culture (if applicable)?

What's missing? Be specific.

2. Assess your workplace: If you work in an organizational context, is it healthy or toxic? Use the criteria from this chapter. If it's toxic, what's your next step?

3. Identify three people who could be part of your support community. Not people you help, but people who could walk alongside you mutually. Write their names down.

4. Take one action this week:

- Reach out to a potential mentor
- Schedule coffee with a colleague for real conversation
- Contact a supervisor or coach
- Be vulnerable with someone instead of performing strength

What's the one thing you'll actually do?

5. **What are you most afraid of** about building real community? Name the fear. Then ask: Is this fear more powerful than your need for connection?

You were never meant to do this alone. The Trinity Himself is your model.

So stop trying to be a solitary god, and step into the community you were created for.

Your survival—and your calling—depend on it.

Chapter 11

Returning to Joy: Reclaiming the Sacred in the Work

I found it in a drawer I hadn't opened in years.

A letter. Handwritten. From my first year of ministry.

"Dear Future Me," it began. "If you're reading this, I hope you still remember why you started..."

I'd written it during a particularly meaningful moment early in my calling—a season when everything felt charged with significance, when every interaction seemed sacred, when I couldn't believe I got to do this work for a living.

The letter went on to describe my hopes, my dreams, my sense of calling. The joy I felt serving people. The wonder of witnessing transformation. The profound privilege of being present in people's most vulnerable moments.

Reading it years later, I realized with a sharp pang: **I'd forgotten.**

Not intellectually. I could still articulate why the work mattered, still believed it was important, still showed up every day to do it.

But the joy? The wonder? The sense of sacred privilege?

Gone. Replaced by exhaustion, routine, and the grim determination to just get through another day.

I'd become functional without being alive. Competent without being connected. Present in body while absent in spirit.

And I realized: **If I was going to continue this work long-term, I didn't just need to survive it. I needed to learn to find joy in it again.**

Not manufactured happiness. Not forced positivity. Not the kind of toxic optimism that denies reality.

But real joy—the deep, soul-level delight that comes from being aligned with God's purposes and fully present to His work in the world.

This chapter is about reclaiming that joy. Not as a luxury, but as essential fuel for sustainable ministry. Because **joy isn't just the reward for faithful service—it's the resource that makes faithful service possible.**

The Loss of Wonder

Something happens to us over time in helping professions. The extraordinary becomes ordinary. The miraculous becomes mundane. What once filled us with awe starts to feel routine.

How We Lose It

Repetition. You've heard this story a hundred times. You've walked someone through this process countless times. The twentieth session on anxiety feels the same as the two hundredth. Familiarity breeds not contempt exactly, but a kind of numbness.

Secondary trauma. As we discussed in Chapter 6, constant exposure to suffering changes us. It's hard to maintain wonder when you're carrying so much pain. The darkness you witness can eclipse the light you once saw so clearly.

Disappointment. You've seen people who seemed so close to breakthrough walk away unchanged. You've invested deeply in people who returned to destructive patterns. You've hoped and been disappointed so many times that self-protection starts to look like wisdom.

Professionalization. You develop clinical language, treatment protocols, professional distance. These tools are necessary for good work, but they can also create a barrier between you and the raw, sacred reality of what you're witnessing. You become a technician instead of a witness.

Burnout. When you're depleted—emotionally, spiritually, physically—you lose the capacity for wonder. You're just trying to survive. Joy feels like a luxury you can't afford.

Cynicism. After years in the field, you've seen the dysfunction of systems, the failings of leaders, the gap between what we claim and what we practice.

Cynicism becomes a kind of armor, protecting you from further disappointment. But it also walls you off from beauty.

What We Lose When We Lose Wonder

Connection to our calling. Without wonder, work becomes just a job. The sense of sacred purpose that called us here in the first place fades. We're left with obligation, not invitation.

Presence to people. When we lose wonder, people become cases, problems, tasks to complete. We stop seeing them as image-bearers of God, each one a universe of complexity and dignity.

Capacity for celebration. We stop noticing the small miracles. We miss the subtle shifts. We overlook the profound in pursuit of the dramatic. We forget that transformation happens in inches, not miles.

Our own souls. Wonder is what keeps our souls alive. Without it, we become mechanical, going through motions without life behind them. We give and give until we've given away even ourselves.

Joy. And ultimately, we lose joy. Not happiness—that comes and goes with circumstances. But joy—the deep gladness that comes from participating in God's work in the world.

Remembering Why You Began

The first step in reclaiming joy is remembering why you started this work in the first place.

Not just "I wanted to help people"—that's true but too general. Go deeper. What was the specific moment, story, or experience that planted this calling in your soul?

Questions to Reconnect With Your "Why"

What first drew you to this work? Close your eyes and go back. Was it a person who helped you in your own crisis? A story you heard that moved you?

A moment when you realized you had a gift for sitting with suffering? A burning sense of injustice that demanded response?

What did you hope to offer? Not what you thought you were supposed to say, but what you actually hoped. Did you want to be the person for others that someone was (or wasn't) for you? Did you want to bring light into darkness? Did you want to fight for the voiceless?

When did you feel most alive in this work? Think back to a moment—early in your career or maybe even recently—when you felt completely aligned with your purpose. When time disappeared. When you knew, bone-deep, this is what you were made for. What was happening?

What breaks your heart? Frederick Buechner wrote that vocation is "where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." What about the world's hunger breaks your heart open? Where does compassion still rise up in you, unbidden and unstoppable?

What do you want your work to say about who God is? If your work is your worship, what does it proclaim about God's character? His heart for the broken? His presence in suffering? His power to redeem and restore?

An Exercise in Remembering

Find a quiet place. Set aside an hour. Bring your journal.

Write a letter to your present self from your past self—from that person who first felt called to this work. What would that earlier version of you want to say to who you've become? What dreams did they have? What did they believe was possible? What were they most excited about?

Then write a letter back. Tell your past self what you've learned. What's been harder than you expected. What's been more beautiful than you imagined. What you'd tell them if you could go back.

This exercise isn't about romanticizing the past or beating yourself up for losing something. It's about reconnecting with the original spark—not to live in nostalgia, but to let that fire reignite what's gone cold.

Seeing Christ in Those We Serve

Jesus said something that should fundamentally shape how we view helping work:

"Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me'" (Matthew 25:37-40).

The person in front of you is Christ.

Not metaphorically. Not poetically. Actually, truly, really—when you serve them, you're serving Him.

What This Changes

It makes the work sacred. You're not just completing clinical tasks or fulfilling job requirements. You're encountering the living God in the face of suffering humanity.

It demands presence. You can't phone it in when you're meeting with Jesus. You can't just go through the motions. His presence commands your full attention.

It creates humility. You're not the savior descending to help the helpless. You're meeting Christ, who often has more to teach you than you have to offer Him.

It transforms disappointment. When someone doesn't change, doesn't improve, doesn't respond how you hoped—you're still serving Christ. The outcome isn't your responsibility. The faithful presence is.

It generates gratitude. You don't have to create meaning in your work. The meaning is already there, inherent in every encounter. You're standing on holy ground.

Practicing Christ-Sighted Ministry

This isn't a metaphor to hold loosely. It's a spiritual discipline to practice intentionally.

Before each encounter, pray: "Lord, help me see You in this person. Help me serve them as I would serve You."

During the encounter, notice: Where is the image of God visible in this person? What dignity remains even in their struggle? Where do you see hints of Christ—in their resilience, their longing for wholeness, their capacity for hope even in darkness?

After the encounter, reflect: Where did I meet Christ today? What did He teach me through this person? How was I changed by serving Him?

Regularly remember: The most challenging client is Christ. The one who frustrates you is Christ. The one who doesn't seem to be making progress is Christ. The one who relapses is Christ. The one who can't pay is Christ.

This practice doesn't make the work easy. But it does make it sacred. And there's a joy that comes from sacred work that can't be found anywhere else.

Celebrating Growth Instead of Outcomes

One of the quickest ways to lose joy in helping work is measuring success by outcomes you can't control.

You can't make someone heal. You can't force transformation. You can't guarantee anyone will choose wholeness. Those outcomes belong to God and to the person's own agency.

But you can witness growth. And growth is worth celebrating—even when it's incomplete, imperfect, and in-process.

Redefining Success

Traditional (outcome-based) measures:

- Client is "cured"

- Problem is completely resolved
- Person is now fully functional
- All symptoms are gone
- They've reached some predetermined endpoint

Growth-based measures:

- Client took one step forward, even if they took two steps back later
- Person showed up even when it was hard
- They were honest about something they'd been hiding
- They tried something new, even if it didn't work perfectly
- They asked for help instead of isolating
- They cried for the first time in years
- They said no to something destructive
- They chose vulnerability over performance
- They expressed anger appropriately
- They laughed

Do you see the difference? Outcome-based success puts the burden on you to produce results. Growth-based success allows you to witness and celebrate what God and the person are doing together—even when it's messy, slow, and incomplete.

The Danger of Outcome Attachment

When your joy depends on outcomes:

- You need people to get better for your sake, not theirs
- You're devastated by relapses and setbacks
- You take credit for progress that isn't yours to claim

- You take blame for failures that aren't yours to carry
- You become controlling, trying to force change
- You lose sight of God's timing and sovereignty
- You burn out trying to carry responsibility that's not yours

When your joy comes from witnessing growth:

- You celebrate small steps as genuine victories
- You trust the process, even when it's slow
- You see setbacks as part of the journey, not the end of it
- You maintain hope because you're not demanding perfect outcomes
- You give God space to work in His timing
- You stay present without needing to control
- You find sustainable joy in the privilege of witnessing

What to Celebrate

Train yourself to notice and name growth:

With clients/congregants: "I want you to know, I'm really proud of you for sharing that today. I know that took courage."

"Do you realize what you just did? Three months ago, you couldn't even say that out loud. Now you're naming it clearly. That's huge growth."

"I'm not disappointed you struggled this week. I'm celebrating that you called me instead of hiding. That's progress."

With colleagues: Take time in staff meetings or supervision to share stories of growth you've witnessed. Not just success stories, but growth stories—the small, sacred shifts that might otherwise go unnoticed.

In your own reflection: Keep a "growth journal" where you record evidence of transformation—not just complete healing, but movement toward wholeness. Read it regularly, especially when you're discouraged.

The Freedom of Witness

Here's the liberating truth: **Your job is to be a faithful witness, not a guarantor of outcomes.**

You show up. You offer your best. You create space. You point toward healing. You participate in what God is doing.

But you're not God. You're not the Savior. You're not responsible for making anyone change.

When you release attachment to outcomes and embrace your role as witness, you find a joy that's not dependent on whether people heal. You find joy in the sacred privilege of being present to what God is doing—whatever that looks like.

Gratitude as Resilience Practice

Paul wrote to the Philippians from prison—literally imprisoned—and yet his letter is saturated with joy.

How?

Partly through the practice of gratitude.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:4-8).

Notice the pattern:

1. Rejoice (not because circumstances are good, but because "the Lord is at hand")
2. Bring requests with thanksgiving
3. Intentionally direct attention to what's true, noble, right, pure, lovely, excellent

Gratitude isn't denial. It's direction—choosing where to focus your attention.

Why Gratitude Matters for Helpers

It counters negativity bias. Our brains are wired to notice threats and problems—useful for survival, but exhausting in helping work where you're constantly encountering pain. Gratitude rewires your attention to also notice beauty, goodness, and grace.

It builds resilience. Research consistently shows that gratitude practices increase psychological resilience, reduce depression, and improve overall wellbeing. For helpers dealing with constant stress, this isn't optional—it's essential.

It restores perspective. When you're immersed in suffering, it's easy to forget that suffering isn't the whole story. Gratitude reminds you that goodness is also real, also present, also part of the larger narrative.

It reconnects you to God. Gratitude is fundamentally relational—it acknowledges receiving from Another. Every "thank you" is an act of worship, a recognition that you're not self-sufficient.

It generates joy. Gratitude and joy are deeply connected. Joy doesn't come from having everything you want—it comes from being grateful for what you have. From noticing and savoring the good that's already present.

Gratitude Practices for Helpers

The Daily Three. Before bed, write down three things you're grateful for from the day. Be specific. Not "I'm grateful for my job" but "I'm grateful for the way Mrs. Johnson laughed today when I told that story. I haven't seen her laugh in months."

The Thanksgiving Examen. As part of your evening prayer (mentioned in Chapter 5), specifically thank God for:

- One person who blessed you today
- One moment of beauty you witnessed
- One small evidence of transformation
- One gift you might have overlooked

The Gratitude Visit. Periodically, reach out to someone who's impacted your life or work. Tell them specifically what they've meant to you. This practice benefits both of you.

The "Nevertheless" Prayer. When you're particularly discouraged, pray: "Lord, this is hard. I'm struggling. I'm discouraged. Nevertheless, I'm grateful for..." Forces you to hold both truth and gratitude simultaneously.

The Sensory Gratitude Practice. Pay attention to your five senses and thank God for what they receive: the taste of your coffee, the warmth of sunlight, the sound of birds, the sight of your child's face, the feel of soft fabric. Simple, embodied gratitude.

The Growth Celebration. At the end of each week, write down evidence of growth you witnessed—in clients, in yourself, in colleagues. Thank God for each one.

When Gratitude Feels Impossible

There will be seasons when gratitude feels impossible. When the pain is too deep, the loss too great, the trauma too fresh.

In those seasons, you don't have to force manufactured thankfulness. That's toxic positivity, not biblical gratitude.

But you can practice **pre-emptive gratitude**—thanking God in advance for what you trust He will do, even though you can't see it yet.

"Lord, I can't see any good right now. I can't feel grateful. But I trust that Your mercies are new every morning, even when I can't perceive them. I thank You in advance for how You'll redeem this, even though I don't understand it yet."

This is gratitude as an act of faith, not feeling. And sometimes that's the only kind available.

Testimony as Fuel

One of the most powerful ways to maintain joy is regularly sharing and hearing testimony—stories of what God has done.

Not just the dramatic conversions or complete healings. All of it—the small graces, the surprising moments, the quiet faithfulness, the unexpected breakthroughs.

Why Testimony Matters

It reminds us we're part of a larger story. Your work isn't isolated or meaningless. It's part of God's ongoing redemptive work in the world. Testimony connects you to that bigger narrative.

It builds faith. Hearing what God has done strengthens belief that He can do it again. When you're discouraged about a current situation, remembering past faithfulness gives you hope.

It creates corporate memory. In teams and communities, shared testimony builds a collective memory of God's goodness that individuals might forget alone.

It generates joy. There's something deeply joyful about remembering and celebrating God's work. Testimony is often accompanied by laughter, tears, gratitude—all expressions of joy.

It gives God glory. Ultimately, testimony shifts focus from our work to God's work. And that's where joy is found—not in what we accomplish, but in what He does.

Creating Space for Testimony

In team meetings. Start with 10-15 minutes of "testimony time" where people share evidence of God's work they've witnessed that week.

In supervision. Don't just process problems and struggles. Also celebrate where you've seen grace, breakthrough, unexpected provision.

In personal reflection. Keep a testimony journal where you record moments when you clearly saw God at work. Read it when you're discouraged.

In worship. Whether in corporate worship or private prayer, regularly recount God's faithfulness. "Remember when...? Thank You for..."

In community. Create rhythms with other helpers where you specifically gather to share stories and celebrate together.

The Discipline of Noticing

Testimony requires attention. You have to notice what God is doing in order to testify to it.

This is a discipline—training yourself to look for evidence of grace amid the chaos of helping work.

Ask yourself regularly:

- Where did I see God show up today?
- What small miracle am I overlooking?
- Where was there unexpected grace?
- What shift happened that I almost missed?
- How was I surprised by goodness?

The more you train yourself to notice, the more you'll see. And the more you see, the more testimony you'll have. And the more testimony you have, the more joy you'll experience.

Worship as Resistance and Restoration

Worship is both resistance and restoration for helpers.

Resistance against the despair, cynicism, and soul-crushing weight of constant exposure to suffering.

Restoration of perspective, joy, and connection to the Source of all healing.

Worship Reorients

When you're immersed in helping work, you can start to believe that you're central to the story. That outcomes depend on your competence, wisdom, strength.

Worship destroys that illusion.

In worship, you remember:

- God is God, and you are not
- He was working before you showed up and will continue after you're gone
- Your strength is finite, but His is limitless
- Your wisdom is limited, but His is perfect
- Your love runs out, but His never does

This isn't discouraging—it's liberating. The pressure is off. You're not the center. You're a participant in something much larger than yourself.

Worship Restores Wonder

Good worship—whether corporate or private—creates space for awe. For beauty. For transcendence.

After a week of sitting with suffering, you need to lift your eyes to something beyond pain. To remember that suffering isn't the whole story. To encounter the God who is both with us in suffering and greater than it.

This might look like:

- Singing until you remember why you believe
- Standing in silence until you can hear God again
- Lifting your hands in surrender
- Dancing in celebration of what God has done
- Weeping in His presence, letting Him hold your grief
- Laughing with the joy that comes from His nearness

Worship Refuels

You cannot give what you haven't received. And worship is where we receive.

We receive:

- His presence in our loneliness
- His peace in our anxiety
- His strength in our weakness
- His joy in our discouragement
- His hope in our despair

Worship isn't just about giving to God (though it is that). It's also about receiving from God. About letting Him fill what has been emptied, restore what has been depleted, heal what has been wounded.

Making Worship Central

For many helpers, worship becomes professional. We lead it. We plan it. We perform it. But we don't actually experience it.

To reclaim worship as restoration:

Participate, don't perform. If you lead worship professionally, find spaces where you're not in charge. Where you can receive without having to give.

Engage multiple senses. Don't just think about God. Sing. Dance. Paint. Walk in nature. Let your body participate in worship, not just your mind.

Create rhythms. Don't just worship when you feel like it. Weekly corporate worship. Daily personal worship. Monthly extended worship. Make it regular, rhythmic, essential.

Be honest in worship. Bring your full self—including your doubts, anger, exhaustion, disappointment. God can handle your honesty. Sanitized worship doesn't restore your soul.

Expect to encounter God. Don't just go through motions. Come expectant that God will meet you, speak to you, touch you. He's faithful to show up when we show up.

The Mission of Joy

Jesus stood up in the synagogue and read from Isaiah, declaring His mission:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

This is **good news**. Liberty. Sight. Freedom. Favor.

Jesus' mission was saturated with hope and joy—not denial of suffering, but proclamation that suffering doesn't have the final word.

If you're continuing Jesus' mission, your work should reflect that same quality of good news.

Not toxic positivity. Not ignoring pain. But carrying a deep, unshakeable hope that redemption is real, healing is possible, and God is faithful.

What This Means Practically

Your presence should communicate hope. Not false promise that everything will be fine, but solid confidence that they're not alone and God is present even here.

You should be able to genuinely celebrate with people. When they experience breakthrough, your joy should be real and evident. If you can't celebrate their growth, something in you needs tending.

You should carry peace into chaos. Not because you're unaffected by suffering, but because you're rooted in Someone who's greater than it.

Your work should point beyond itself. Not just to symptom reduction, but to wholeness. Not just to coping, but to flourishing. Not just to surviving, but to life abundant.

Joy should be part of your methodology. Not manufactured or forced, but organically present because you genuinely believe in the possibility of transformation.

Reclaiming the Sacred

The work you do is already sacred. You don't have to make it sacred.

You sit with people in their darkest moments. You witness transformation. You participate in redemption. You offer hope to the hopeless, comfort to the suffering, presence to the lonely.

This is holy work.

The sacred isn't something you add to the work through spiritual practices or religious language. It's already there, woven into the very fabric of what you do.

Your job is to **notice** it. **Remember** it. **Honor** it.

How to Reclaim the Sacred

Start sessions with brief prayer. Even silently in your own heart: "God, make me aware of Your presence here. Help me see what You're doing."

Create rituals that mark transitions. Lighting a candle. Washing hands. Taking three breaths. Physical markers that this is different from ordinary time—this is sacred encounter.

Pay attention to thin places. Celtic Christians talked about "thin places" where the veil between heaven and earth seems thinner. Your work is full of them—moments of profound vulnerability, unexpected grace, surprising breakthrough. Notice them. Name them.

End days with acknowledgment. "God, thank You for the sacred ground I stood on today. Thank You for the privilege of witnessing Your work."

Speak of your work as sacred. Not to elevate yourself, but to honor what you've been invited into. When people ask about your work, occasionally share not just what you do, but the sacred nature of it.

The Joy Set Before Him

Hebrews tells us that Jesus endured the cross "for the joy that was set before him" (Hebrews 12:2).

Even in the midst of the worst suffering imaginable, Jesus was sustained by joy—not happiness about the circumstances, but joy rooted in seeing the bigger picture, knowing the resurrection that would follow, anticipating the redemption that was coming.

Joy sustained Him through suffering.

And joy can sustain you.

Not because your circumstances are always joyful. Not because helping work is easy or painless. But because you know the bigger story.

You know:

- Suffering is real, but redemption is more real
- Pain is powerful, but God is more powerful
- Darkness exists, but light overcomes it

- Death happens, but resurrection follows

This joy—deep, resilient, rooted in the character of God rather than the circumstances of life—this is what makes sustainable ministry possible.

This is what allows you to continue showing up year after year, encounter after encounter, story after story.

This is what prevents the work from destroying you.

Because joy isn't just a nice addition to ministry. **Joy is what makes long-term ministry possible.**

Pause and Reflect:

This chapter is about reclamation. Time to get practical.

1. **Pull out that letter or journal from early in your calling.** If you don't have one, write one now to your future self. What drew you to this work? What did you hope? What brought you joy? Let yourself reconnect with that original spark.
2. **This week, practice seeing Christ in those you serve.** Before each encounter, pray to see Him. After each encounter, ask: Where did I meet Christ today? Write down what you notice.
3. **Start a gratitude practice.** Choose one from this chapter and commit to it for 30 days. Put it on your calendar. Actually do it.
4. **Share testimony with someone.** This week, tell one person (colleague, friend, spiritual director) about one specific moment when you saw evidence of God's work in your helping work. Practice noticing and naming.
5. **Plan one act of worship that's just for you.** Not leading. Not performing. Just receiving. When will you do this? Put it on your calendar now.

6. **Answer honestly:** On a scale of 1-10, how much joy do you currently experience in your work? What's one thing you could do to move that number up even one point?

The sacred work you do deserves to be met with joy—not manufactured happiness, but deep, resilient, God-rooted joy that sustains you for the long haul.

It's time to reclaim it.

Chapter 12

Beloved Rising: Caring From Identity, Not Exhaustion

There's a moment I return to when I need to remember who I am.

It was a particularly brutal season. I'd just stepped back from a ministry role that had nearly destroyed me. I was in therapy, finally addressing wounds I'd spent years medicating through helping others. I felt like a failure, a fraud, a waste of a calling.

I was walking alone in the woods, arguing with God—or maybe just raging at the sky. Asking all the questions I'd been too afraid to ask out loud: "What was the point of all that pain? Why did You let me get so lost? How can I ever go back to ministry when I'm this broken? What use am I to You now?"

And then, unbidden and unexpected, a thought that felt like it came from somewhere beyond myself:

"You were never useful to Me. You were always beloved."

I stopped walking. Stopped breathing for a moment.

"You were always beloved. Before you ever helped a single person. Before you ever preached a sermon or led a session or offered comfort. You were Mine, and that was enough. That has always been enough."

I sat down on the trail and wept—not the bitter tears I'd been crying for months, but something different. Tears of relief. Of recognition. Of coming home to a truth I'd known intellectually but never believed viscerally:

My worth wasn't tied to my usefulness. I was loved before I was functional. I was Beloved before I was helpful.

And if that was true—if I was loved not because of what I could do but because of whose I was—then everything changed.

The pressure was off. The performance could end. The exhausting attempt to earn what was already freely given could finally cease.

I could rest. And from that rest, I could rise. Not as someone trying to prove their value through productivity, but as someone secure in their identity, offering from overflow rather than depletion.

This is what it means to be **Beloved Rising**—not caregivers who never fall, but caregivers who know they're loved even when they do, and who rise again and again through grace to continue the sacred work they've been called to.

Caring From Identity, Not Exhaustion

We've talked throughout this book about all the ways helping work can go wrong: burnout, codependency, vicarious trauma, lost boundaries, absorbed pain, forgotten joy.

All of these problems share a common root: **We're trying to care from the wrong place.**

We're caring from exhaustion, trying to give what we don't have. We're caring from insecurity, trying to earn love through usefulness. We're caring from wounds, trying to heal ourselves by healing others. We're caring from fear, terrified that if we're not needed, we're not valuable.

But none of this is how we were designed to care.

We were designed to care from identity—from the secure knowledge that we are beloved by God, held by Him, filled by Him. To give not from our own meager resources but from His abundant supply. To minister not to earn love but as a response to love already received.

The Order Matters

Jesus said something to His disciples that contains the entire secret of sustainable ministry:

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love" (John 15:9).

Notice the order:

1. The Father loves Jesus

2. Jesus loves the disciples
3. The disciples are invited to abide in that love
4. Only then (in verses 12-17) does Jesus commission them to love others

Receiving comes before giving. Being loved precedes loving. Abiding happens before acting.

But we reverse this. We think:

- If I love well enough, I'll become lovable
- If I serve faithfully enough, I'll earn God's pleasure
- If I help enough people, I'll finally feel worthy
- If I give from my resources, I'll eventually feel full

This is backwards. And it's killing us.

What Changes When You Care From Identity

Your security shifts from performance to position. You're not secure because you're doing well—you're secure because you belong to God. Nothing you do can make Him love you more. Nothing you fail at can make Him love you less.

Your motivation shifts from earning to expressing. You're not serving to become worthy—you're serving because you already are. Your work becomes an expression of gratitude, not a mechanism for earning approval.

Your capacity shifts from finite to infinite. When you're giving from your own resources, you run out. When you're giving from God's supply, the well never runs dry. You become a conduit, not a reservoir.

Your anxiety shifts from high to low. You're no longer responsible for outcomes you can't control. You're simply responsible for faithfulness. And even when you fail at faithfulness, grace is sufficient.

Your boundaries shift from guilt-inducing to life-giving. Saying no is no longer about being selfish—it's about being stewards of what God has entrusted to you. Including yourself.

Your rest shifts from luxury to necessity. Rest isn't something you earn after you've done enough—it's the posture from which you work. You work from rest, not for rest.

Your worth shifts from variable to constant. You don't have good days and bad days in terms of your value. You're beloved on the days you help twenty people and the days you can barely help yourself. Your worth is constant because it's rooted in God's character, not your performance.

The Practice of Remembering

Knowing you're Beloved intellectually and living from that identity are two different things.

You need practices—daily, tangible, embodied practices—that anchor you in this truth, especially when everything in you wants to revert to performing for love instead of receiving it.

Morning Anchor: The Belovedness Prayer

Before you do anything else—before you check your phone, before you start planning your day, before you begin thinking about all the people who need you—spend five minutes anchoring yourself in your identity.

Pray something like this:

"God, before I am a helper, I am Your beloved child. Before I am useful, I am loved. Before I accomplish anything today, I am already enough in Your sight.

I receive Your love for me—not because I've earned it, but because You freely give it. I receive Your delight in me—not for what I do, but for who I am. I receive Your pleasure—not based on my performance, but based on Your grace.

Today, I will work from rest, not for rest. I will give from fullness, not from depletion. I will serve as a response to Your love, not to earn it.

Help me remember: I am Beloved before I am helpful. Amen."

Or create your own version. The words matter less than the intentional posture of receiving God's love before you try to give it away.

Throughout the Day: The Breath Anchor

We talked about breath prayers in Chapter 5, but this one specifically addresses identity:

Breathe in: "I am beloved" Breathe out: "I am enough"

Or: Breathe in: "Loved by God" Breathe out: "Not for what I do"

Or: Breathe in: "I receive" Breathe out: "I release"

Use this when you feel yourself slipping into performance mode. When you're about to check your worth by checking your productivity. When someone's disappointment threatens to undo you. When you're tempted to say yes out of guilt rather than genuine calling.

Three breaths. Returning to center. Remembering whose you are.

Evening Anchor: The Release Prayer

At the end of each day, release what was never yours to carry in the first place.

"God, I release to You: - The outcomes I can't control - The people whose healing is between them and You - The burdens I picked up that weren't mine - The need to be needed - The performance I offered instead of presence - The ways I looked for my worth in my work

I receive from You: - Your assessment of this day as enough - Your pleasure in my faithfulness, however imperfect - Your grace for my failures - Your restoration for my depletion - Your love that doesn't fluctuate with my productivity

I was Beloved when I woke up. I am Beloved as I go to sleep. Tomorrow, I will still be Beloved. This is enough. You are enough. I am enough in You. Amen."

These practices aren't magical formulas. They're disciplined reminders. Ways of training your soul to believe what your theology affirms: **You are loved not for what you do, but for whose you are.**

Becoming a Non-Anxious Presence

One of the greatest gifts you can offer a hurting world is to be a non-anxious presence in the midst of chaos.

Not because you're unaffected by suffering. Not because you don't care. But because you're rooted in something deeper than the crisis, held by Someone stronger than the storm.

What Non-Anxious Presence Looks Like

You can sit with someone's panic without panicking yourself. Their anxiety doesn't become your anxiety. You can hold space for their fear without being consumed by it.

You can hear terrible news without immediately spiraling. Not because you're cold, but because you're anchored. You're deeply affected but not destabilized.

You can acknowledge uncertainty without needing to fix it immediately. You're comfortable saying, "I don't know, but we'll figure it out together" rather than frantically scrambling for answers to make the discomfort go away.

You can be fully present to someone's pain without taking responsibility for resolving it. You witness without rescuing. You care without carrying.

You can maintain perspective in crisis. Not minimizing the difficulty, but also not catastrophizing. Able to see both the pain of the present and the possibility of redemption.

You can respond rather than react. There's a space between stimulus and response where you can choose—because you're not driven by anxiety, compulsion, or the need to be needed.

The Source of Non-Anxious Presence

You can't manufacture non-anxious presence through technique. It's not a skill you develop through training.

Non-anxious presence is the fruit of being deeply rooted in God's love.

When you know—really know, soul-deep—that:

- God is sovereign and you are not
- You are held even when everything feels like it's falling apart
- Your worth isn't tied to solving everyone's problems
- God's love for you is constant regardless of outcomes
- You are secure in His hands even when life is insecure

Then you can be present to chaos without being controlled by it.

How Anxious Presence Harms

When you bring anxiety instead of peace to your helping work:

You amplify the other person's anxiety. Their fear feeds your fear, which feeds their fear. You create a spiral instead of offering stability.

You make decisions from panic instead of wisdom. Anxious caregivers rush to fix, control, or rescue. Non-anxious caregivers can think clearly about what's actually helpful.

You communicate that the situation is hopeless. If you—the supposed expert, the spiritual leader, the helper—are panicking, what hope do they have?

You model unhealthy coping. People learn not just from what you say but from how you are. When you're anxious, you teach them that anxiety is the appropriate response to difficulty.

You miss what God is doing. Anxiety narrows attention to the problem. Peace creates space to notice where grace is showing up, where growth is happening, where God is present.

Cultivating Non-Anxious Presence

Know your triggers. What situations, stories, or dynamics make you anxious? When you know your triggers, you can prepare for them instead of being blindsided.

Practice self-regulation. Learn to notice when anxiety is rising in your body and use tools to settle your nervous system: breath work, grounding techniques, brief movement, prayer.

Stay connected to your Source. Non-anxious presence isn't something you maintain through willpower. It flows from abiding connection with God. When you're disconnected, anxiety floods in.

Differentiate regularly. Remind yourself: "This is their crisis, not mine. I can care without carrying. Their anxiety is not my anxiety."

Trust the process. Not everything needs to be fixed immediately. Sometimes the most helpful thing is simply being present while transformation unfolds slowly.

Remember the bigger story. This crisis, as real as it is, isn't the end of the story. God is faithful. Redemption is real. Resurrection follows death.

Rising Again and Again Through Grace

Let me tell you the truth about the life we're describing in this book:

You will fall.

You'll have seasons where you forget you're Beloved and slide back into performance. You'll burn out again. You'll violate boundaries you thought

you'd established. You'll absorb pain you meant to release. You'll lose joy and wonder and have to fight to reclaim them again.

This isn't failure. This is being human.

The question isn't whether you'll fall. The question is whether you'll let grace raise you again.

The Myth of Linear Progress

We want transformation to work like this: You learn the lessons, implement the practices, and steadily improve until you arrive at some destination called "healthy helper."

But that's not how it works.

Real transformation looks more like a spiral. You circle around the same issues at deeper and deeper levels. You learn something, forget it, relearn it more deeply. You grow, then struggle, then grow again from a different place.

You don't "arrive." You keep returning—to truth, to practices, to God, to your identity as Beloved.

And every time you return, it's not starting over. It's coming back home to what's always been true, and will always be true, no matter how many times you forget it.

Jude's Promise

Near the end of Jude's short letter, he offers one of the most beautiful promises in Scripture:

"Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen" (Jude 24-25).

God is able to keep you from stumbling.

Not: You are able to keep yourself from stumbling through sheer determination and perfect practice of everything in this book.

God is able. His power. His keeping. His faithfulness.

And when you do stumble—because you will—He's able to raise you again. To dust you off. To restore you. To present you blameless not because you've been perfect but because He covers you with grace.

What Rising Through Grace Looks Like

You acknowledge the fall without shame spiraling. "I'm struggling again. I've slipped back into old patterns. I need help." Not "I'm a total failure and I'll never get this right."

You return to basics. The practices you've let slide—prayer, rest, boundaries, community, gratitude—you pick them up again. Not as penance, but as return to what gives life.

You seek help again. Back to therapy. Back to spiritual direction. Back to honest conversation with trusted friends. You don't try to pull yourself up by your bootstraps.

You receive grace instead of trying to earn restoration. You don't have to do enough good things to make up for falling. You simply receive the love that was there before you fell and will be there after.

You remember this isn't the first time, and it won't be the last. And that's okay. You're not being asked to be perfect. You're being invited to be faithful—which includes the faithfulness of getting back up.

You trust that God is still working. Even in the falling, even in the struggling, even in the seasons that feel like regression—God is doing something. Probably something deeper than you can see.

The God of Hope

Paul wrote a blessing that speaks directly to those of us who keep falling and rising:

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Romans 15:13).

The God of hope.

Not the God of "you've got this." Not the God of "try harder." Not the God of "eventually you'll arrive and never struggle again."

The God of **hope**—which means the God who meets you in your weakness, who fills you when you're empty, who gives you joy and peace not because you've earned it but because you're believing (trusting, receiving) His grace.

And by the power of the Holy Spirit—not your own strength, not your own willpower—you abound in hope.

Hope that you can do this work without being destroyed by it. Hope that you can serve from wholeness. Hope that every time you fall, grace will raise you again. Hope that God is faithful even when you're not.

A Word to the Weary

If you've made it to this final chapter and you're thinking, "This all sounds beautiful, but I'm so tired. I don't know if I have it in me to try again"—

I want to speak directly to you.

You don't have to have it in you. That's the whole point.

This book isn't a manual for trying harder. It's an invitation to stop trying to do in your own strength what only God can do in His.

You're tired because you've been trying to be God. To save people. To carry what only He can carry. To generate in yourself what can only flow from Him.

The invitation isn't to try harder. It's to surrender more deeply.

To let yourself be held. To receive before you give. To remember that you are Beloved before you are useful, and that being Beloved is enough—it has always been enough.

You don't need more strength. You need to stop pretending you don't need His strength.

You don't need to be more capable. You need to embrace your limitations and let Him work through them.

You don't need to have it all together. You need to let yourself be held together by the One who keeps you from stumbling.

Rest in This

You are allowed to be finite. God didn't ask you to be infinite. He made you with limits on purpose. Honor them.

You are allowed to be human. With needs, struggles, wounds, questions. Your humanity isn't a bug—it's a feature.

You are allowed to need help. To see a therapist, take medication, step back from ministry, ask for prayer, admit you're drowning. Needing help isn't failure—it's honesty.

You are allowed to say no. To things that are good. To people who genuinely need help. To opportunities that would normally be exciting. No is a complete sentence, and it's not a sin.

You are allowed to rest. Not just when you've earned it. Not just when everything is finished. Now. Before you're too depleted to receive the restoration rest offers.

You are allowed to be in process. You don't have to have it all figured out before you can help others. You just have to be honest about where you are and committed to your own healing.

You are allowed to not be God. In fact, you're required not to be. There's already a Savior, and you're not Him. And that's incredibly good news.

Commissioning: Sent Out as Beloved

We're at the end of this journey together. But in many ways, we're really at the beginning.

Because now the question is: What will you do with what you've received?

Will you return to the patterns that were destroying you, or will you step into a new way of caring—from identity, not exhaustion?

Will you keep trying to be the savior, or will you embrace your role as beloved participant in what the actual Savior is doing?

Will you minister from your wounds, or will you bring your wounds to the Light and let them become scars that testify to redemption?

I want to commission you—to bless you and send you back out into the sacred work you've been called to, but from a different place.

Commissioning Blessing for Caregivers

(You can read this aloud to yourself, or better yet, have someone read it over you.)

Beloved child of God:

You are loved—not for what you do, but for whose you are.

Before you ever helped a single person, you were precious in God's sight.

Before you ever made a difference, you mattered to Him.

Before you ever proved your worth, you were worthy because He made you in His image.

You are Beloved. This is your primary identity. Everything else flows from this.

Go now into the work you've been called to—

But go as one who is already loved, not as one trying to earn love.

Go as one who is already enough, not as one trying to prove worth.

Go as one who is held, not as one trying to hold the world together.

Go remembering:

You are not the Savior—Jesus is. Your job is to participate in His work, not to do His work for Him.

You cannot save anyone. You can only point them to the One who already has.

You cannot heal anyone. You can only create space for the Healer to work.

You cannot carry what only God can carry. Release it. Again and again, release it to Him.

Go with boundaries:

You are allowed to say no—even to good things, even to genuine needs.

You are allowed to rest—it is not optional; it is commanded.

You are allowed to have needs—you are not less valuable because you need help.

You are allowed to be finite—God made you with limits, and honoring them honors Him.

Go with community:

You were never meant to do this alone. Receive help. Ask for support. Be vulnerable. Let others carry you sometimes.

Find mentors who can guide you, peers who can walk alongside you, and a community that will tell you the truth in love.

When you fall—and you will fall—let your community help you rise again.

Go with practices:

Remember daily that you are Beloved.

Release nightly what you were never meant to carry.

Sabbath weekly, trusting that God's work continues when you rest.

Process regularly what you absorb, lest it poison your soul.

Celebrate growth, even when it's small and incomplete.

Return to joy, again and again, because joy is your strength.

Go with grace:

You will forget. You will fall back into old patterns. You will violate your own boundaries. You will absorb what you meant to release. You will lose your way.

This is not failure. This is being human.

And grace will meet you there. Every single time.

The God who called you is faithful. He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.

He is able to keep you from stumbling—and when you do stumble, He is able to raise you again.

Go with hope:

This work is hard, but it is holy.

This calling is costly, but it is sacred.

This path is painful, but it leads to life—not just for those you serve, but for you.

God is not finished with you. He is not disappointed in you. He does not regret calling you.

He sees you. He loves you. He is proud of you—not for your accomplishments, but for your faithfulness.

And His faithfulness to you is greater than your faithfulness to Him.

Go now, Beloved.

Go as one who is loved.

Go as one who is held.

Go as one who is called not to save the world, but to participate in the saving work of the One who already has.

Go and serve from overflow, not depletion.

Go and care from identity, not exhaustion.

Go and minister from your scars, not your bleeding wounds.

Go and be a non-anxious presence in a anxious world.

Go and point people not to yourself, but to Jesus.

And when you grow weary—and you will grow weary—

Return.

Return to the truth that you are Beloved.

Return to the practices that sustain you.

Return to the community that holds you.

Return to the God who called you and who will never let you go.

You are sent.

Not alone, but with the Spirit.

Not in your strength, but in His.

Not to save, but to serve.

Not to be God, but to reveal Him.

In the name of the Father, who calls you Beloved,

And the Son, who modeled sustainable ministry,

And the Spirit, who empowers and sustains you,

Go in peace. Serve in joy. Rest in grace.

Amen.

A Final Word: This Is Not The End

Closing this book doesn't mean you've arrived. It means you're beginning.

Beginning to live and serve from a different place.

Beginning to believe that you're Beloved before you're useful.

Beginning to build practices that sustain rather than deplete.

Beginning to let grace raise you every time you fall.

This is not a destination. It's a way of life.

A way of living that honors your humanity while fulfilling your calling.

A way of serving that doesn't destroy you but deepens you.

A way of caring that flows from fullness rather than drains into emptiness.

You are Beloved.

This has always been true.

This will always be true.

No matter how many times you forget, it remains true.

And from that truth—from that identity, from that secure place of being held and loved and called—you can serve for the long haul.

Not perfectly. Not without struggle. Not without falling and rising and falling again.

But sustainably. Faithfully. Hopefully.

As one who is Beloved, rising again and again through grace to continue the sacred work of participating in God's redemptive love for a broken world.

Welcome to the beginning.

Welcome home to your identity.

Welcome to caring from a place that doesn't destroy you.

You are Beloved.

Now rise, and serve from that truth.

"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

(Ephesians 3:20-21)

APPENDIX A: Self-Assessment Tools

Burnout Inventory for Helpers

Introduction: How to Use This Assessment

This inventory is designed specifically for those in helping professions—therapists, counselors, pastors, chaplains, social workers, nurses, physicians, and others whose vocation involves caring for people in pain.

Purpose: To help you recognize early warning signs of burnout and take action before reaching crisis. This is not a clinical diagnostic tool, but a reflection guide to increase self-awareness and prompt healthy intervention.

How to Take This Assessment:

1. **Find a quiet space** where you can be honest without interruption (15-20 minutes)
2. **Answer based on the last 3 months**, not just how you feel today
3. **Be ruthlessly honest**—this is for you, not for evaluation by others
4. **Don't overthink**—your first instinct is usually accurate
5. **Come back to this quarterly** to track patterns over time

Important Notes:

- High scores don't mean you're a failure—they mean you need support
- This assessment is a starting point for conversation with therapists, spiritual directors, or supervisors
- If you're in immediate crisis, skip to the "When to Seek Immediate Help" section at the end

PART 1: Emotional Exhaustion

Rate each statement on a scale of 0-4:

- **0** = Never/Almost Never
- **1** = Rarely (a few times per year)
- **2** = Sometimes (monthly)
- **3** = Often (weekly)
- **4** = Very Often (daily or almost daily)

1. ___ I feel emotionally drained by my work
2. ___ I feel used up at the end of the workday
3. ___ I dread going to work
4. ___ I feel tired when I wake up and have to face another day at work
5. ___ Working with people all day is a real strain for me
6. ___ I feel frustrated by my work
7. ___ I feel I'm working too hard at my job
8. ___ Working directly with people puts too much stress on me
9. ___ I feel like I'm at the end of my rope
10. ___ I feel numb or empty when I should feel compassion
11. ___ I have trouble accessing my emotions—either I feel nothing or I'm overwhelmed
12. ___ I cry easily or unexpectedly over minor things
13. ___ I feel irritable or short-tempered with clients/patients/congregants
14. ___ I fantasize about quitting or escaping my profession
15. ___ I feel resentful toward the people I'm supposed to be helping

Emotional Exhaustion Subtotal: ____/60

PART 2: Depersonalization/Detachment

Rate each statement on a scale of 0-4 (same scale as above)

- 16. ___ I feel I treat some clients/patients/congregants as impersonal objects
- 17. ___ I've become more callous toward people since taking this job
- 18. ___ I worry that this work is hardening me emotionally
- 19. ___ I don't really care what happens to some of the people I serve
- 20. ___ I feel clients/patients/congregants blame me for their problems
- 21. ___ I use dark humor or cynicism to cope with the work
- 22. ___ I avoid meaningful engagement and just go through the motions
- 23. ___ I find myself labeling people or reducing them to their problems/diagnoses
- 24. ___ I feel annoyed by people's emotional needs
- 25. ___ I maintain excessive professional distance to protect myself
- 26. ___ I've stopped seeing the people I serve as fully human
- 27. ___ I feel judgmental or critical toward those I'm helping
- 28. ___ I gossip about clients/patients/congregants to cope with stress
- 29. ___ I've lost empathy for certain types of struggles
- 30. ___ I find myself blaming people for their own suffering

Depersonalization Subtotal: _____/60

PART 3: Reduced Personal Accomplishment

Rate each statement on a scale of 0-4 (same scale as above)

- 31. ___ I feel I'm not making a difference in people's lives
- 32. ___ I question whether my work matters
- 33. ___ I feel ineffective at my job
- 34. ___ I've lost confidence in my abilities
- 35. ___ I feel like an imposter who doesn't deserve to be in this role
- 36. ___ I can't remember the last time I felt truly effective
- 37. ___ I doubt I'm in the right profession
- 38. ___ I feel like I'm just going through the motions without real
 impact
- 39. ___ I've stopped celebrating progress or growth in those I serve
- 40. ___ I focus on failures and overlook successes
- 41. ___ I feel my training/gifts/calling are being wasted
- 42. ___ I question whether I'm actually helping or potentially harming
 people
- 43. ___ I feel stuck and unable to grow professionally
- 44. ___ I compare myself unfavorably to colleagues
- 45. ___ I've lost sight of why I entered this profession

Reduced Personal Accomplishment Subtotal: ____/60

PART 4: Physical Exhaustion

Rate each statement on a scale of 0-4 (same scale as above)

- 46. ___ I have difficulty falling or staying asleep
- 47. ___ I wake up exhausted even after a full night's sleep

- 48. ___ I experience frequent headaches
- 49. ___ I have digestive problems (nausea, stomach pain, IBS symptoms)
- 50. ___ I experience muscle tension, especially in neck, shoulders, or back
- 51. ___ I get sick more often than I used to
- 52. ___ My immune system seems weakened
- 53. ___ I have unexplained aches and pains
- 54. ___ I've gained or lost significant weight without intending to
- 55. ___ I experience chest tightness or heart palpitations
- 56. ___ I feel physically exhausted most of the time
- 57. ___ I rely on caffeine, sugar, or other substances to get through the day
- 58. ___ I've neglected my physical health (skipping doctor visits, ignoring symptoms)
- 59. ___ I have no energy for exercise or activities I used to enjoy
- 60. ___ My body feels like it's breaking down

Physical Exhaustion Subtotal: _____/60

PART 5: Spiritual Depletion

Rate each statement on a scale of 0-4 (same scale as above)

- 61. ___ Prayer feels empty or mechanical
- 62. ___ I avoid spiritual practices I once found meaningful
- 63. ___ Scripture reading feels like a duty, not a delight

- 64. ___ I feel distant from God
- 65. ___ I question God's goodness or presence
- 66. ___ I've lost my sense of calling
- 67. ___ I feel spiritually dry or numb
- 68. ___ Worship feels performative rather than genuine
- 69. ___ I'm angry at God but can't admit it
- 70. ___ I struggle to see evidence of God's work in my ministry
- 71. ___ My personal relationship with God has become
 indistinguishable from my professional role
- 72. ___ I feel guilty about my spiritual state but can't seem to change it
- 73. ___ I've stopped experiencing joy in spiritual things
- 74. ___ I question core beliefs I once held firmly
- 75. ___ I feel like I'm spiritually going through the motions

Spiritual Depletion Subtotal: _____/60

PART 6: Relational Strain

Rate each statement on a scale of 0-4 (same scale as above)

- 76. ___ My close relationships are suffering because of my work
- 77. ___ I'm irritable or short-tempered with family/friends
- 78. ___ I have little emotional energy left for people I love
- 79. ___ I feel isolated even when I'm with others
- 80. ___ My spouse/partner has expressed concern about my
 wellbeing
- 81. ___ I've withdrawn from friendships

- 82. ___ I prioritize work over important relationships
- 83. ___ I feel like nobody understands what I'm going through
- 84. ___ I'm physically present but emotionally absent with loved ones
- 85. ___ I've stopped making time for social connection
- 86. ___ My family resents my work or feels abandoned by me
- 87. ___ I feel like a burden to those close to me
- 88. ___ I hide my struggles from people who care about me
- 89. ___ I have no one I can be fully honest with
- 90. ___ I feel lonely even in community

Relational Strain Subtotal: ____/60

PART 7: Boundary Erosion

Rate each statement on a scale of 0-4 (same scale as above)

- 91. ___ I regularly work outside scheduled hours
- 92. ___ I can't say "no" without feeling guilty
- 93. ___ I check work email/messages during personal time
- 94. ___ I'm available to people 24/7
- 95. ___ I cancel personal plans for work demands
- 96. ___ I feel responsible for outcomes I can't control
- 97. ___ I take on more than I can reasonably handle
- 98. ___ I feel guilty taking time off
- 99. ___ I think about work constantly, even during rest
- 100. ___ My self-care practices have disappeared

101. ___ I skip meals or don't eat properly due to work demands
102. ___ I've given up hobbies or activities I enjoyed
103. ___ My vacation time goes unused or I work during it
104. ___ I've lost the ability to distinguish between my needs and others' demands
105. ___ I override my own physical/emotional signals to keep going

Boundary Erosion Subtotal: ____/60

PART 8: Secondary Traumatic Stress

Rate each statement on a scale of 0-4 (same scale as above)

106. ___ I have intrusive thoughts about clients'/patients' traumatic experiences
107. ___ I have nightmares related to the work I do
108. ___ I avoid certain types of cases or stories
109. ___ I'm hypervigilant about safety for myself or loved ones
110. ___ I've become cynical about humanity
111. ___ I feel emotionally flooded when hearing trauma narratives
112. ___ I've lost my sense that the world is a safe place
113. ___ I experience vicarious trauma symptoms (reliving others' experiences)
114. ___ I'm triggered by certain situations that remind me of clients' stories
115. ___ I've become numb to suffering that once deeply moved me
116. ___ I avoid news, movies, or conversations about certain topics

117. ____ I startle easily or feel constantly on edge
118. ____ I feel like I'm carrying others' trauma in my body
119. ____ I have difficulty trusting people
120. ____ I've lost hope that healing is possible

Secondary Traumatic Stress Subtotal: ____/60

SCORING GUIDE

Calculate your totals:

- Emotional Exhaustion: ____/60
- Depersonalization: ____/60
- Reduced Personal Accomplishment: ____/60
- Physical Exhaustion: ____/60
- Spiritual Depletion: ____/60
- Relational Strain: ____/60
- Boundary Erosion: ____/60
- Secondary Traumatic Stress: ____/60

OVERALL TOTAL: ____/480

INTERPRETATION GUIDE

Individual Category Scores (out of 60):

0-12: Low Risk

- You're managing well in this area
- Continue current practices

- Stay vigilant for changes

13-24: Mild Concern

- Early warning signs present
- Time for preventive action
- Implement protective practices now

25-36: Moderate Concern

- Significant symptoms emerging
- Intervention needed soon
- Seek support and make changes

37-48: High Concern

- Serious burnout symptoms
- Immediate action required
- Professional help recommended

49-60: Critical

- Crisis level
- Cannot continue without intervention
- Seek immediate professional help

Overall Total Score (out of 480):

0-96: Low Burnout (Thriving/Sustainable) You're in a healthy place overall. Continue the practices that are working. Stay alert to changes and maintain preventive measures.

97-168: Mild Burnout (Warning Zone) Early signs of burnout are present. This is your opportunity to intervene before things get worse. Focus on the 2-3 highest-scoring categories and implement the action steps for those areas.

169-240: Moderate Burnout (Intervention Needed) You're experiencing significant burnout across multiple domains. You need to make changes—not eventually, but now. Consider:

- Taking time off (at least a week, ideally longer)
- Reducing your workload
- Starting therapy if you're not already in it
- Addressing the specific areas with highest scores
- Having honest conversations with supervisors/leadership about sustainability

241-312: Severe Burnout (Crisis Point) You're in crisis. Continuing at your current pace is dangerous to your health and potentially harmful to those you serve. You need immediate intervention:

- Take extended leave if possible
- Seek professional help immediately (therapist, physician)
- Consider whether you need to step back from your role temporarily or permanently
- Don't try to fix this alone—you need support
- This is not weakness; this is wisdom

313-480: Critical Burnout (Emergency) You are in serious danger. Your health, relationships, and wellbeing are at risk. Please:

- Stop what you're doing and get help today
- Contact a mental health professional, your physician, or a crisis line
- Tell someone you trust what's happening
- You may need medical/psychiatric intervention
- This is not sustainable and you cannot power through it

- **See "When to Seek Immediate Help" section below**
-

ACTION STEPS BASED ON RESULTS

FOR ALL SCORES: Foundational Practices

Regardless of your score, these practices are essential:

1. **Schedule this assessment quarterly** to track trends
 2. **Share results with someone who can hold you accountable**
(therapist, spiritual director, trusted friend, supervisor)
 3. **Identify your highest-scoring category** and address it first
 4. **Don't try to fix everything at once**—pick 1-3 concrete changes to start
-

IF YOUR EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION SCORE IS HIGH (25+):

Immediate Actions:

- Schedule at least 3-5 days completely away from work within the next two weeks
- Reduce your caseload/responsibilities by at least 20% if possible
- Start or return to therapy specifically to process your emotional depletion
- Implement a daily practice of emotional release (see Chapter 5 practices)
- Create a "no emotional labor" zone in your day (time when you're completely off duty)

This Week:

- Say no to at least one new request

- Schedule one activity purely for pleasure (not productive, not helpful—just enjoyable)
- Begin a daily debrief practice before leaving work

This Month:

- Evaluate whether you're in the right role or if changes are needed
- Begin tracking what specifically drains you emotionally and what replenishes you
- Have a conversation with a supervisor about workload

Long-term:

- Consider whether a sabbatical is needed
- Develop regular rhythms of rest that are non-negotiable
- Address any codependent patterns that make emotional boundaries difficult

IF YOUR DEPERSONALIZATION SCORE IS HIGH (25+):

Immediate Actions:

- This is serious—you're at risk of harming those you serve
- Take at least a few days off to create space
- Schedule an appointment with a therapist who understands helping professions
- Review Chapter 11 on reclaiming joy and sacred seeing

This Week:

- Before each encounter, pray: "Help me see Christ in this person"
- After each encounter, write one specific way this person reflects God's image

- Share with a trusted colleague or supervisor that you're struggling with depersonalization

This Month:

- Begin therapy if not already in it—this pattern won't change without help
- Read "The Wounded Healer" by Henri Nouwen or similar book that reconnects you to the sacred nature of helping work
- Attend a retreat or take extended time for spiritual renewal
- Consider whether you need to take a break from certain types of cases that trigger your cynicism most

Long-term:

- Address unhealed wounds that may be causing you to distance yourself
- Develop practices that help you see people's humanity (testimonies, celebration of growth, etc.)
- If this doesn't improve with intervention, honestly consider whether you need a career change—continuing to practice while depersonalized is harmful to others

IF YOUR REDUCED PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT SCORE IS HIGH (25+):**Immediate Actions:**

- Start a "growth journal" where you record any evidence of progress in those you serve (no matter how small)
- Review Chapter 11 on celebrating growth instead of outcomes
- Share your feelings of ineffectiveness with a mentor or supervisor

This Week:

- Reach out to 2-3 past clients/patients/congregants who experienced positive change and ask if you can hear their updates (if appropriate in your field)
- List 5 specific skills you bring to your work
- Identify one area where you'd like to grow professionally and take a small step toward learning

This Month:

- Attend a workshop or training that reignites your passion
- Seek consultation or supervision specifically about feelings of ineffectiveness
- Read your letter about why you started this work (from Chapter 11 exercise)
- Have an honest conversation with a trusted colleague about whether your self-assessment is accurate or if you're being too hard on yourself

Long-term:

- Shift focus from outcomes to faithfulness and presence
- Develop better metrics for "success" that honor the slow work of transformation
- Consider whether you need additional training or a specialty change
- Work with a therapist on underlying issues of self-worth

IF YOUR PHYSICAL EXHAUSTION SCORE IS HIGH (25+):

Immediate Actions:

- Schedule a comprehensive physical exam with your doctor—tell them you're experiencing burnout
- Take at least 3 full days off to sleep and rest your body

- Stop ignoring physical symptoms (they're your body's warning system)

This Week:

- Establish a regular sleep schedule (same bedtime every night)
- Eat three actual meals each day
- Move your body for at least 20 minutes daily (walk, stretch, gentle exercise)
- Limit caffeine and assess whether you're using substances to cope

This Month:

- Address any medical issues you've been ignoring
- Develop a sustainable rhythm of sleep, nutrition, and movement
- Consider whether you need to reduce work hours
- Evaluate medication needs with a physician if symptoms don't improve with rest

Long-term:

- Your body is telling you something important—listen to it
- Physical exhaustion often indicates that workload is unsustainable
- Make non-negotiable commitments to physical self-care
- If physical symptoms persist despite rest, dig deeper into underlying causes

IF YOUR SPIRITUAL DEPLETION SCORE IS HIGH (25+):**Immediate Actions:**

- Schedule a meeting with a spiritual director within the next two weeks

- Take a 24-hour personal retreat for silence and prayer (no agenda, just being with God)
- Review Chapter 8 about wounded healers needing healing

This Week:

- Separate your personal spiritual life from your professional role (no "using" Scripture for sermon prep during devotional time)
- Spend time in worship where you're not leading
- Practice one form of prayer that's new to you
- Be honest with God about your anger, disappointment, or numbness

This Month:

- Read a book on spiritual formation (not ministry technique)
- Attend a retreat center for at least a weekend
- Begin meeting regularly with a spiritual director
- Practice Sabbath with intentionality

Long-term:

- Your spiritual depletion is serious—you cannot minister to others from an empty spiritual life
- Consider whether you need an extended sabbatical for spiritual renewal
- Address theological questions or doubts with a mature spiritual guide
- Develop practices that nurture your soul, not just your ministry

IF YOUR RELATIONAL STRAIN SCORE IS HIGH (25+):

Immediate Actions:

- Have an honest conversation with your spouse/closest person about how your work is affecting relationships
- Cancel or reduce work commitments this week to prioritize key relationships
- Apologize to anyone you've hurt or neglected due to work stress

This Week:

- Schedule dedicated time with your spouse/close friend with phones off
- Ask your closest people: "How is my work affecting you? What do you need from me?"
- Actually listen without defending or explaining
- Make at least one commitment to repair a strained relationship

This Month:

- Establish non-negotiable family/friend time that work cannot intrude upon
- Consider couples/family counseling if relationships are significantly damaged
- Reduce work hours if possible
- Evaluate whether current role is sustainable given relational cost

Long-term:

- Relationships are more important than your career—full stop
- If your work is destroying your marriage or key relationships, something has to change
- Build friendship/community separate from work where you can be known, not needed
- Learn to be emotionally present, not just physically present

IF YOUR BOUNDARY EROSION SCORE IS HIGH (25+):

Immediate Actions:

- Read or reread Chapter 4 on boundaries
- Identify your three weakest boundaries and address one this week
- Say no to at least one thing in the next 48 hours

This Week:

- Set one new boundary (office hours, no weekend calls, no checking email after 7pm, etc.)
- Communicate this boundary clearly to relevant people
- Practice tolerating the discomfort when people push back
- Schedule one appointment for yourself (massage, therapy, spiritual direction, coffee with friend) and treat it as non-negotiable as a work appointment

This Month:

- Review all your current commitments and identify what needs to be eliminated or delegated
- Learn to say "no" without over-explaining or apologizing
- Block out time for self-care on your calendar before filling it with work
- Address the underlying beliefs that make boundary-setting difficult (therapy can help with this)

Long-term:

- Boundaries aren't selfish—they're stewardship
- If you can't maintain boundaries in your current role, the role may need to change

- Develop tolerance for others' disappointment
 - Remember: You're modeling for others what healthy helping looks like
-

IF YOUR SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS SCORE IS HIGH (25+):

Immediate Actions:

- Seek a therapist who specializes in trauma and vicarious trauma **immediately**
- This is not something you can handle alone
- Review Chapter 6 on vicarious trauma
- Consider reducing exposure to traumatic material if possible

This Week:

- Begin daily practices of emotional release and spiritual cleansing
- Tell your supervisor/colleagues that you're experiencing secondary trauma
- Assess whether you need time off
- Start a trauma journal to track symptoms

This Month:

- Continue therapy consistently
- Implement all the practices from Chapter 6
- Evaluate whether your current caseload/role is sustainable
- Consider whether you need to specialize differently or work with different populations
- Join a peer support or consultation group

Long-term:

- Secondary trauma is serious and won't resolve without professional help
- Regular ongoing therapy is essential if you work with traumatic material
- Develop sustainable rhythms of processing and release
- Consider whether this type of work is sustainable for you long-term
- If symptoms don't improve, you may need to step back from trauma work

CREATING YOUR PERSONAL ACTION PLAN

Based on your assessment, create a concrete action plan:

My Three Highest-Scoring Categories:

1. _____ (Score: ____)
2. _____ (Score: ____)
3. _____ (Score: ____)

Actions I Will Take This Week:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Actions I Will Take This Month:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Support I Need:

I will contact: _____ (therapist, spiritual director, supervisor, mentor)

By this date: _____

People I Will Share These Results With:

1. _____
2. _____

My Next Assessment Date: _____

(Mark your calendar now for 3 months from today)

WHEN TO SEEK IMMEDIATE HELP

Go to an emergency room or call 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) if you are experiencing:

- Thoughts of suicide
- Thoughts of harming others
- Complete inability to function
- Psychotic symptoms
- Severe depression or anxiety that feels unmanageable

Seek help within 24-48 hours if:

- Your total score is above 313
- Any category score is above 49
- You're having panic attacks or severe anxiety daily
- You're using substances to cope
- You're experiencing significant physical symptoms
- Your relationships are in crisis

- You're having thoughts that you'd be better off dead (even if not actively suicidal)

Additional Crisis Resources:

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 988 or 1-800-273-8255
 - **Crisis Text Line:** Text HOME to 741741
 - **SAMHSA National Helpline:** 1-800-662-4357 (substance abuse/mental health)
 - **Pastoral Care Line (for ministry leaders):** Contact your denomination or check FaithTrust Institute
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A FINAL WORD

If your scores are high, please hear this:

You are not a failure. You are a human being who has been carrying too much for too long.

High scores don't mean you're weak. They mean you've been trying to do infinite work with finite resources. They mean you've been giving from depletion instead of overflow. They mean you need help—and needing help is not weakness; it's wisdom.

This assessment is not meant to shame you. It's meant to give you information so you can make life-giving changes.

You are Beloved before you are useful. Your worth is not tied to your productivity. God's love for you is not contingent on your ministry effectiveness.

Whatever your score, you matter. Your wellbeing matters. And it's time to care for yourself with the same compassion you've been extending to others.

Take the next step. Make the call. Send the email. Have the conversation.

Your life—and your calling—depend on it.

*"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." —
Matthew 11:28*