

EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Removing the Barriers, Receiving the Exchanges

A Twelve-Week Journey

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River of Life Ministries · CHC Connect

Emotional Regulation: Removing the Barriers, Receiving the Exchanges

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Table of Contents

<i>A Personal Note to You</i>	4
PART ONE – THE BARRIERS	5
Week 1: The Pause – PAUSE.....	6
Week 2: The Overloaded Plate – SIFT	11
Week 3: The HEART Check – HEART	16
Week 4: RESET – RESET.....	23
Week 5: CATCH – CATCH	42
THE TURN	66
Week 6: The Turn.....	67
PART TWO – THE EXCHANGES	75
Week 7: The Great Exchange – Acceptance	76
Week 8: Made on Purpose – Identity	83
Week 9: Asleep in the Storm – Security	89
Week 10: What Are You Doing, and How Can I Help? – Approval	95
BRINGING IT TOGETHER	100
Week 11: The Whole Picture.....	101
Week 12: BE – The Retreat.....	106
SOURCES AND FURTHER READING	109

A Personal Note to You

You are not an accident. You are not ordinary. There has never been anyone exactly like you, and there never will be again. God created you intentionally, with a particular design, a unique combination of gifts, and a purpose that only you can fulfill. The world needs what He has placed within you.

God has already provided what we need to live the full and abundant life He created us to experience. It is not something we must earn, achieve, or manufacture by simply trying harder. It has already been given.

The difficulty is that life has a way of placing barriers between us and what God has already provided—old wounds, exhausting habits, deeply rehearsed lies, and the weight of burdens we were never meant to carry. Those barriers do not change what God has given us. They simply keep us from living fully in what He has provided.

That is what these next twelve weeks are about.

Together, we will begin by gently identifying and clearing away the barriers that have kept you from living freely—the very real obstacles that have made emotional steadiness feel beyond your reach. Then we will turn a corner and learn what it means to receive: to rest in the life-changing truths of who God is and who you are in Him.

You will discover that you are already accepted, already known, already secure, and already approved. From that settled place, you can become who you were created to be and begin doing the things God has uniquely prepared you to do.

That is where this journey is leading.

It is not merely about experiencing calmer emotions, as valuable as that may be. It is about learning to live a life that is full, free, and purposeful—a life in which you are no longer constantly bracing for the next storm, but are able to step into the assignment God prepared for you before you were born.

I am so glad you are here.

Take your time. Be honest with yourself, and be gentle with your progress. Come expecting God to do what He has always promised to do—to meet you, to free you, and to remind you of who you have been all along.

Let's begin.

—Cindy H. Carr, D.Min., MACL

Part One

The Barriers

Before we can live more freely, we must become willing to notice what has been standing in the way.

Barriers do not always announce themselves. Sometimes they appear as patterns we have repeated for so long that they feel like part of who we are. They can hide beneath busyness, fear, self-protection, perfectionism, or the need to keep everyone else happy. Some began as ways of surviving difficult seasons. Others developed quietly through disappointment, loss, unmet needs, or beliefs we accepted without ever questioning whether they were true.

Whatever their origin, these barriers are not proof that you have failed. They are places in your life that need understanding, healing, and the light of God's truth.

During Part One, you will be invited to slow down and look honestly at what you have been carrying. You will begin to recognize the patterns that drain your strength, disturb your peace, and keep you from living as freely as God intended. This is not about blaming yourself or becoming ashamed of how you have coped. It is about growing in awareness so that what once operated unnoticed no longer has the power to direct your life.

Some of what you discover may be uncomfortable. Be patient with yourself. Lasting change rarely begins with condemnation; it begins with the courage to tell the truth and the grace to remain present while God meets us there.

You do not have to remove every barrier at once. You simply need to become willing to see what is there, understand what it has cost you, and trust that it does not have to remain.

Let us begin with honesty, compassion, and hope.

WEEK 1

The Pause

When Emotion Wants to Decide for You

Barrier: Reacting before we respond — letting emotion make the decision before wisdom ever gets a word in.

Central truth: God never asked us to stop feeling. He teaches us how to respond to what we feel.

Truth line: *Emotions make excellent servants but poor masters.*

Before we begin week one, take a moment to breathe. You are starting something worth starting.

Over the weeks ahead, we are going to walk together through what it means to live as emotionally healthy, whole people — the kind of people who can feel deeply without being ruled by their feelings, who can meet hard moments with steadiness instead of being swept away by them. If you have ever wished you handled things a little differently — reacted less, worried less, carried less — then this journey is for you.

Here is what I want you to know from the very start: this is not a self-improvement program, and it is not a course in trying harder. It is a journey into what God has already made true about you and available to you. We will use practical tools, and Scripture, and a bit of gentle science along the way — but underneath all of it is a good God who made you on purpose and wants to see you free.

The road has two halves. In the first weeks, we will work on the barriers — the very real things that get in the way of responding wisely to life: the reactions we regret, the overloaded plates, the neglected needs, the old wounds, the lies we rehearse. These are the obstacles we learn to clear. Then, in the second half, something shifts. We stop working so hard to remove things, and we begin to receive — resting in truths about who God is and who we are that steady everything else. By the end, we will gather in person to celebrate what God has done.

You do not need to have it all together to begin. You only need to be willing. God has done a great deal of transforming work in people who simply showed up and stayed open, and He is not finished with any of us. So come as you are, bring your honest self, and let's take the first step together.

Part One — The Teaching

Have you ever said something you wished you could take back? Reacted before you had time to think? Known the right thing to do and still struggled to do it? If so, you're not alone. The Bible is filled with ordinary people who felt deeply and sometimes acted before they thought — and their lives show us that emotional regulation is something we can learn and grow in.

Let's start with what emotional regulation is not. It does not mean never feeling angry, never feeling afraid, never crying, never grieving, never being disappointed. God gave us our emotions, and He called everything He made very good. Emotional regulation is not the absence of feeling.

Here is a working definition. Emotional regulation is the God-given ability to recognize our emotions, understand what they are telling us, and choose responses that reflect wisdom, love, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit rather than simply reacting to our feelings or circumstances.

Or, more simply: our emotions become excellent servants but poor masters. A servant informs you. A master decides for you. God never asked us to silence the servant. He teaches us not to hand it the keys.

Scripture shows us both — people who let emotion serve them, and people who let it rule. Consider two men who both felt deeply.

Joseph was betrayed by his own brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused, and forgotten in prison. Any one of those would justify a lifetime of bitterness. Yet across years of injustice, Joseph kept choosing faithfulness over resentment. When his brothers finally stood before him, he chose forgiveness instead of revenge. His emotions were real — Scripture says he wept aloud — but they never became his masters.

Moses, on the other hand, shows us that even a faithful, seasoned leader can be mastered in a single moment. For forty years Moses led a difficult people with remarkable patience. But at the waters of Meribah, worn down and provoked, God told him to speak to the rock — and Moses struck it instead, twice, in anger. One unguarded moment. That moment cost him the Promised Land. Moses reminds us that sincere faith and long obedience do not make us immune. Regulation is not a trait you achieve once. It is a practice you keep.

Between these two men sits the whole point of this study. The difference between Joseph and Moses at the rock was not that one had feelings and the other didn't. It was what they did in the space between the feeling and the response. Joseph lived in that space. Moses, in one moment, skipped it.

That space has a name. We call it the pause. And the good news of Scripture is that the pause can be learned. Nehemiah shows us how — when the king asked him a sudden, high-stakes question, Nehemiah was afraid, but before he

answered he prayed. A breath of prayer between the feeling and the words. That is the whole skill in one verse.

Even Peter, who so often reacted before he thought, did not stay that way. The man who once acted on impulse became, after the resurrection and the work of the Spirit, a leader marked by wisdom and restraint. We will meet Peter again later in this series. For now he reminds us of the most hopeful truth in this whole study: emotional regulation is not about personality. It is about growth. Nobody is too reactive to change.

So how do we live in the space Joseph lived in? We practice a pause. Not a vague “calm down,” but five steps you can actually walk through. We’ll call it PAUSE.

P — Pay attention

What am I actually feeling right now?

The pause begins the moment you notice something is rising. Not after the words are out — before. Most reactions happen precisely because we skip this step; the emotion moves straight to action without ever being seen. Simply catching it — something is happening in me right now — is the first and most important move.

A note on the science: the brain's alarm can fire a reaction faster than the thinking part of the brain can weigh in. Noticing the feeling is what gives the wiser, slower part of you a chance to catch up.

Scripture: *“Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”*
(James 1:19)

A — Acknowledge it

I name it honestly, without shame.

Once you notice the feeling, name it — I’m angry, I’m afraid, I’m hurt. Naming a feeling is not confessing a sin; the feeling itself is information, not disobedience. David filled the Psalms with named emotions — fear, rage, grief, despair — and brought every one of them to God. He didn’t always regulate well, but he never pretended. Honesty about what we feel is where regulation starts.

Scripture: *“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.”* (Psalm 139:23)

U — Understand it

What is this emotion telling me — and is it true?

Emotions are signals, but they are not always accurate reporters. Anger may be pointing at a real injustice — or at wounded pride. Fear may be warning you of danger — or rehearsing one that will never come. The pause is where you ask what the feeling is actually about, and whether the story attached to it is true. This is the difference between letting the emotion inform you and letting it decide for you.

Scripture: *“The heart is deceitful above all things... who can understand it?”* (Jeremiah 17:9)

S — Surrender it

I bring it to God before I act on it.

This is the step that makes the pause Christian rather than merely clever. Before you respond, you hand the feeling to God. This is Nehemiah's breath of prayer before he spoke to the king. It is not a long ritual — it can be a single sentence: Lord, this is what I'm feeling; guide my response. Surrender is what keeps the pause from being white-knuckle self-control and turns it into dependence on the Spirit.

Scripture: *“In your anger do not sin.”* (Ephesians 4:26)

E — Engage wisely

Now I choose a response instead of firing off a reaction.

Only now — after noticing, naming, understanding, and surrendering — do you act. And now the action can reflect wisdom, love, and the Spirit's leading rather than the raw force of the feeling. Sometimes engaging wisely means speaking. Sometimes it means staying silent. Sometimes it means walking away to respond later. The point is that you are now choosing, not being carried.

Scripture: *“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”* (Proverbs 15:1)

Part Two — Putting It to Work

PAUSE is simple to understand and hard to do, because emotion is fast and the pause feels slow. The only way it becomes natural is practice — and the best time to practice is before you need it, not in the heat of the moment.

Learn it cold. This week, walk through the five steps a few times when you're calm, so the path is familiar when you're not. Pay attention, Acknowledge, Understand, Surrender, Engage. Say them until you don't have to look them up.

Catch one small moment. You don't have to start with the hardest thing in your life. Pick the small stuff — the traffic, the tone in someone's email, the interruption. The next time a minor irritation rises, run the pause on purpose. Small moments are the training ground for the big ones.

Notice the space. After a reaction you're not proud of, don't pile on the guilt. Instead, go back and find the exact spot where the pause would have gone — the space between the feeling and the words. Just seeing where it belongs makes it easier to reach for next time.

One honest word before you go. The pause is a tool, and a good one. But if you find that your reactions feel completely beyond your control — that anger, panic, or despair regularly overtake you no matter how hard you try to pause — that is not simply a willpower problem, and it is not weak faith. It may be a sign that something deeper needs care, and the wise, faithful next step is to talk with a doctor or a counselor. Learning to regulate our emotions sometimes means letting someone else help us carry them first.

Closing Truth

Every one of us has emotions. The question is never whether we feel — it's whether our feelings help us love God and love others, or whether they begin making our decisions for us. Scripture and science tell the same hopeful story: God designed us to grow. Our minds can be renewed, our habits can change, and the space between feeling and response can widen with practice. Emotional regulation is one of the ways that transformation becomes visible in everyday life.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for making me a feeling person — for emotions that You called good. Teach me not to silence them or be ruled by them, but to let them serve. When something rises in me, help me pause: to pay attention, to name it honestly, to understand what it's telling me, to surrender it to You, and then to engage with wisdom instead of reacting in the flesh. Where I have handed my emotions the keys, gently take them back. And when I fail, remind me that You are patient, that growth is a process, and that You are not finished with me yet. Amen.

WEEK 2

The Overloaded Plate

Making Room to Respond

Barrier: The overloaded plate — carrying more than God ever handed us, until the weight makes us react instead of respond.

Central truth: A full plate is not proof of a faithful life. Some of what we carry, God gave us. Some we picked up ourselves.

Truth line: *Rest is not the reward for emptying the plate. It is the design that makes an emptied plate possible.*

Earlier we learned the pause — the space between the feeling and the response. Now we ask why that space so often disappears. And for many of us the honest answer is simple: there's no room. When the plate is overloaded, there's no margin left to pause in. We react because we're running on empty.

Picture your life as a dinner plate. Every commitment, every relationship, every responsibility, every good cause you've said yes to — it all goes on the plate. And here's the trouble: most of us keep adding without ever taking anything off. The plate fills, then overfills, and we tell ourselves that a full plate is the mark of a faithful, useful life.

But a full plate is not proof of faithfulness. Some of what we carry, God genuinely handed us. And some we picked up all on our own — out of guilt, out of habit, out of the need to be seen as capable and reliable, out of a simple inability to say no. The weight feels the same either way. The plate doesn't care where a thing came from. But we should, because carrying a load God never assigned will wear us down just as surely as carrying one He did — and it will crowd out the room we need to respond to life instead of react to it.

Here is what overload does to us, and it helps to understand it plainly. Our bodies were built for the sprint, not the marathon. When a real demand appears, the body rises to meet it — and then, when the demand passes, it's meant to power back down and recover. Chronic overload never lets it power down. The alarm keeps ringing quietly in the background, day after day, and the body and mind pay the bill for staying braced all the time. The more depleted we are, the worse we get at exactly the kind of calm, prayerful discernment this study is asking of us. That's not a character flaw. It's how we're made.

And Scripture said all of this long before anyone could measure it. Rest, stillness, limits, Sabbath — these were never a concession to weakness. They are the design. When we override them, both our bodies and our judgment begin to fail, and we lose the very clarity we'd need to sort the plate in the first place.

Listen to how Scripture keeps returning to this.

Jesus offers a different kind of load: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30) A yoke Jesus fits to you doesn't chafe the way one you strap on yourself does.

When Martha was “worried and upset about many things,” Jesus gently told her that Mary had chosen “what is better” (Luke 10:41–42). Busyness is not the same thing as devotion.

When Jethro watched Moses trying to handle everything alone, he said plainly, “What you are doing is not good. You will only wear yourself out.” (Exodus 18:17–18) Some overload is simply a load never meant for one person to carry.

And Jesus Himself, at the end of His life, prayed, “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.” (John 17:4) Notice — He finished the work the Father gave Him. Not every possible good work. He left things undone, and still called it finished.

That is the freedom this week offers. You can leave good things undone and still, in God's eyes, have lived a finished life. The goal is not an empty plate. The goal is the right plate — holding what God handed you, and released from what you picked up on your own. To get there, we need a way to tell the difference. We'll call it SIFT.

S — See it

What is actually on my plate?

You cannot sort what you won't look at. The first step is simply to see the whole plate honestly — every commitment, every role, every recurring obligation, named and laid out. This includes the invisible items: the things you're carrying not because you chose them this week, but because you've always carried them and never stopped to ask why. Seeing is harder than it sounds, because an overloaded life keeps us too busy to look at how overloaded it is.

Scripture: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

I — Inspect it

Where did this come from — and does it still belong?

Now hold each item up and ask where it came from. There are really three kinds of things on any plate. Some were assigned — God genuinely handed them to you, and they are yours to carry. Some were chosen — you picked them up yourself, sometimes for good reasons and sometimes out of guilt, fear, or the need to be needed. And some were inherited — nobody ever handed them to you at all; they're simply there because they've always been there, running on by default because you never stopped to take them off. That third kind is the sneakiest, because it's invisible. It doesn't feel like a choice. It just repeats, week after week, quietly taking up room.

Scripture: *“Martha, Martha... you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed — or indeed only one.”* (Luke 10:41–42)

F — Filter

Does this stay, come off for a season, or come off for good?

Once you know where a thing came from, you can decide what happens to it — and there are three honest outcomes, not just two. Some things stay on the plate; they're yours, and you carry them. Some come off for a season; they're good, even God-given, but not for right now — you set them down for this stretch and may pick them up later. And some come off for good; you picked them up on your own, and it's time to release them entirely. Not everything that comes off is a failure. Sometimes the most faithful thing you can do is set a good thing down.

Scripture: *“What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.”* (Exodus 18:17–18)

T — Trust

Can I leave something undone and still be at peace?

Here is the step that makes the whole thing possible. You can only set a good thing down if you trust that God is not measuring your worth by how full your plate is. Jesus left work undone and still called His life finished, because His standing rested in the Father, not in His output. So can yours. Trust is what turns setting something down from an act of guilt into an act of freedom. An unfinished life can still be a finished work in God's eyes.

Scripture: *“I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.”* (John 17:4)

Part Two — Putting It to Work: The Plate Inventory

This is the exercise the week is named for. It works best slowly, with a pen, somewhere unhurried.

Fill the plate. On a piece of paper — or on index cards, one per item — write down what's actually on your plate right now. Your commitments, roles, standing responsibilities, the recurring things that eat your time and energy. Don't edit as you go. Just get it all out where you can see it. Aim to capture the invisible ones too — the things you do every week without ever deciding to.

Inspect each one. Hold each item up to the one question at the heart of this week: Did God hand me this, or did I pick it up myself? Then push a little further with a few honest sub-questions:

- Did I say yes to this prayerfully — or reflexively, to avoid disappointing someone?
- When I picture keeping this, do I feel settled peace, or low-grade dread?
- Am I carrying this out of calling, or out of the need to be seen as capable?
- Is this still here because it belongs — or just because I never took it off?

Filter — stays, season, or gone. Sort each item into one of three piles: stays on the plate, comes off for a season, or comes off for good.

Set down one thing. You don't have to overhaul your whole life this week. Choose one item from the “off” piles and actually release it — send the email, decline the invitation, step back from the role. Freedom is a verb. One honest act of setting down teaches you more than a page of good intentions.

A few honest words before you go. Three things to hold onto as you do this:

“Picked it up myself” is not an accusation. We pick up good things all the time. Something can be genuinely good and still not be yours to carry in this season. You are not being scolded for a generous life.

Some loads are not optional. Caring for a child, a sick parent, a job that keeps the lights on — that is not clutter to subtract. This exercise is about the discretionary load, the things you volunteered for, not your real God-given responsibilities.

And not everyone is free to simply say no. For some, a full plate is survival, not people-pleasing. If that's you, the goal isn't a dramatic act of subtraction — it's one honest look and one small step toward freedom. And if the weight you're carrying feels crushing no matter what you set down, that is worth talking about with a doctor, counselor, or pastor. Some loads were never meant to be carried alone.

Closing Truth

A full plate is not proof of a faithful life. Some of what we carry, God handed us — and some we picked up ourselves. The freedom this week offers is not an empty plate but the right one: holding what He gave, released from what we didn't. Rest is not the reward for emptying the plate. It is the design that makes an emptied plate possible.

Closing Prayer

Father, You never asked me to carry everything — only what You handed me. Give me the courage to see my plate honestly, the wisdom to know which loads are truly mine, and the freedom to set down what I picked up on my own. Teach me that rest is not my failure but Your design, and that an unfinished life can still be a finished work in Your eyes. Quiet me enough to hear You, and let me carry only what You give. Amen.

WEEK 3

The HEART Check

Caring for the Person Carrying the Plate

Barrier: Neglected needs — the unnoticed emptiness that makes us react instead of respond.

Central truth: Often what looks like an emotional problem is really an unmet need that has gone unnoticed too long.

Truth line: *The same needs God designed to strengthen us become stumbling blocks when we consistently neglect them.*

Earlier we sorted the plate. Now we turn to the person carrying it.

A Prophet Under a Tree

One of the most honest moments in all of Scripture belongs to the prophet Elijah, and it comes right after one of his greatest victories.

On Mount Carmel, Elijah had just seen God answer with fire in front of the whole nation. It was a mountaintop triumph. And then, only a day later, a single threat from Queen Jezebel sent him running for his life into the wilderness. He collapsed under a broom tree, alone and utterly spent, and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life.” This was not a weak man or a faithless one. This was one of the great prophets, at the end of himself.

Here is what is remarkable about how God responded. He did not rebuke Elijah. He did not give him a sermon, or correct his theology, or remind him of the victory he had just witnessed. God's very first response to His despairing prophet was breathtakingly practical: He let him sleep. Then an angel woke him, and instead of instruction, there was food and water. “Get up and eat,” the angel said, “for the journey is too much for you.” Elijah ate, and slept again, and ate again.

Only after the sleep and the food and the rest did God address what was happening in Elijah's heart. And even then it was gentle — not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but in a “gentle whisper.” (1 Kings 19:12) Then came connection: God sent Elijah a companion, Elisha, so he would not be alone. And finally, purpose: a renewed calling and the reminder that he was not the only one left, that seven thousand others still stood with him.

Look at the order of God's care. Rest. Food. Gentle presence. Connection. Renewed purpose. Before God ever addressed the emotional and spiritual crisis, He tended to the whole person. Elijah thought his problem was that he wanted to die. God knew that a great deal of it was that he was exhausted, hungry, isolated, and depleted. God ran His prophet through what we might call a HEART check before He ever preached to his heart.

That is the truth this week is built on.

Caring for the Whole Person

An overloaded plate doesn't just steal our time. It drains our emotional reserves. It leaves us physically exhausted, mentally distracted, spiritually depleted, and relationally disconnected. Eventually, like Elijah, we find ourselves reacting instead of responding — and sometimes believing things about our lives that simply are not true.

God created us as whole people. Our physical health, emotional well-being, relationships, and spiritual lives are beautifully connected. When one area is neglected, the others begin to feel the strain. Often, what appears to be an emotional problem is actually an unmet need that has gone unnoticed for far too long.

So this week we learn a simple tool to catch that before our emotions take control. I call it the HEART Check. It gives us a chance to pause before we react and ask one honest question: “What is my heart trying to tell me?”

It is not a diagnostic tool. It is an awareness tool. It reminds us that emotional regulation isn't simply about controlling our emotions — it's about caring for the person God created us to be. Sometimes our HEART becomes a stepping stone toward peace. Sometimes it becomes a stumbling block that leaves us vulnerable. The difference is often found in whether we are paying attention to the needs God built into us. So before reacting, making an important decision, or assuming the worst, pause and check your HEART.

H — Hungry

Have I nourished my body?

When this need is met, your brain has the energy it needs to think clearly. Patience increases, decisions become wiser, and emotions are easier to manage. Caring for your body is one way of honoring the gift God has given you.

When this need is ignored, small frustrations become big problems. Irritability rises. Self-control weakens. You may find yourself snapping at people when your real problem is simply that your body is running low on fuel. Remember, the angel's first gift to Elijah was a meal.

A note on the science: the part of the brain that helps us regulate emotions and make wise decisions runs on energy. When we're depleted, it simply doesn't work as well — which is part of why hunger and wise responses so rarely travel together.

Scripture: *“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”* (1 Corinthians 10:31)

Practical Statement *Sometimes the most spiritual thing I can do is eat something and try again.*

E — Exhausted

Have I given myself permission to rest?

When this need is met, your mind becomes clearer and your emotions steadier. You are better able to hear God's voice and respond thoughtfully rather than impulsively.

When this need is ignored, fear grows louder. Problems seem larger. Patience disappears quickly, and your emotional brakes simply don't work as well. Elijah wanted to die under that tree — and the first thing God did was let him sleep. Rest was not a luxury. It was the beginning of his healing.

A note on the science: a tired brain loses access to the very functions that keep us calm and wise. Remember how a depleted body loses its judgment? Rest is where that gets repaired. We saw that rest is God's design, not our failure — and here is what happens to our emotions when we go without it.

Scripture: *“He gives sleep to those he loves.”* (Psalm 127:2)

Practical Statement *Rest is not the reward for finishing the work. It is what makes the work possible.*

A — Angry

Am I carrying unresolved hurt, frustration, or anxiety?

When this need is acknowledged, emotions become information instead of dictators. Anger points us toward issues that need attention rather than becoming a weapon against the people around us. Even Elijah's despair was pointing at something real — he was overwhelmed and afraid, and naming it was the first step toward healing it.

When this need is ignored, resentment grows quietly underneath the surface. We often explode over little things because we never dealt with the big things. The frustration we refuse to name does not disappear; it simply waits for the next small trigger and comes out sideways.

A note on the science: emotion that is never named tends to stay active in the background, keeping the body braced and the fuse short — which is why simply putting honest words to what we feel can take so much of its power away.

Scripture: *“In your anger do not sin.”* (Ephesians 4:26)

Practical Statement *The anger I refuse to name today becomes the overreaction I regret tomorrow.*

R — Relationships

Am I connected to people who strengthen me?

When this need is healthy, relationships provide encouragement, accountability, perspective, and hope. They remind us we were never meant to carry life alone. One of God's kindest provisions for the exhausted Elijah was a companion — He gave him Elisha, so the prophet would not have to walk on by himself.

When this need is neglected, isolation magnifies everything — fear, anxiety, discouragement, and distorted thinking. Alone under his tree, Elijah became convinced he was the only faithful person left in Israel. He was wrong; there were seven thousand others. But isolation had shrunk his whole world down to his own despair. We begin believing things we would never believe if we were talking with someone we trust.

Scripture: *“Two are better than one... If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.”* (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10)

Practical Statement *Isolation is where lies grow loudest. Connection is where truth gets back in.*

T — Time with God

Have I spent time with the One who knows me best?

When this need is prioritized, peace replaces panic and perspective replaces confusion. We begin responding from God's truth instead of our circumstances. Notice that God saved this for last with Elijah — only after rest, food, and presence did He speak to the prophet's heart, and even then in a gentle whisper, not a storm.

When this need is neglected, life becomes noisy. We rely on our own strength. We begin reacting to circumstances instead of resting in God's promises. The quiet where we would have heard His voice gets crowded out, and we are left navigating everything on our own.

Scripture: *“Be still, and know that I am God.”* (Psalm 46:10)

Practical Statement *When everything feels loud, the first need to check is often the quietest one.*

Part Two — Putting It to Work

The HEART Check works best when it becomes a habit — something you reach for before the reaction, not after. This week, practice running the check at two kinds of moments.

The daily moment. Once a day — morning is easiest for most people — walk slowly through the five letters and ask each question honestly. Hungry? Exhausted? Angry? Disconnected? Distant from God? You're not fixing anything yet. You're just noticing. Awareness is the whole exercise.

The flare moment. The next time you feel yourself starting to react — the sharp reply rising, the frustration climbing — pause and run the HEART Check right there. More often than you'd expect, the emotion in front of you isn't really about the person in front of you. It's a need that went unmet hours ago and finally found a voice.

Do an Elijah. When you find yourself at the end of your rope — overwhelmed, hopeless, ready to give up — resist the urge to fix your heart first. Follow God's order with Elijah instead. Eat something. Sleep. Reach for one person. Get quiet before God. Sometimes the crisis that felt spiritual turns out to be, in large part, a body and a soul that simply needed care.

One honest word before you go. The HEART Check is an awareness tool, and it is a good one. But some struggles are bigger than a checklist. If you meet these needs — you're eating, resting, connected, spending time with God — and the heaviness, anxiety, or hopelessness doesn't lift, that is not a failure of effort and it is not weak faith. It may be a sign that something deeper needs care, and the wise, faithful next step is to talk with a doctor or a counselor. Even Elijah, after the rest and the food, still needed God to meet him. Caring for the person God made you to be sometimes means letting someone else help carry it.

Closing Truth

Elijah thought he wanted to die. What he mostly needed was sleep, a meal, a friend, and the gentle voice of God. His story is a mercy to all of us, because it tells us that our lowest moments are not always what they seem — and that God's care for us begins with the whole person, body and soul together.

The HEART Check reminds us that the same needs God designed to strengthen us can become stumbling blocks when we consistently neglect them. Emotional regulation begins not by ignoring those needs, but by caring for them — the way God cared for His exhausted prophet under the tree.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for making me a whole person — body, mind, heart, and spirit, all knit together by You. Thank You that when Elijah was at the end of himself, You did not scold him; You fed him, rested him, and drew near. Teach me to pay attention to the needs You built into me, and to care for them as an act of worship rather than neglecting them until they master me.

When I am tempted to react, help me pause and listen to what my heart is trying to tell me. When I am at the end of my rope, remind me to eat, to rest, to reach for others, and to grow quiet before You. And when the load is heavier than I can carry alone, give me the humility to reach for help. Amen.

WEEK 4

RESET

Old Wounds, Present Moments

RESET

Old Wounds, Present Moments

When Yesterday Tries to Drive Today

Barrier: Old wounds, old beliefs, old failures—and even old successes—that continue shaping present reactions.

Central truth: The past may explain how we arrived here, but it does not have the authority to decide where God takes us next.

Truth line: *When the reaction is bigger than the moment, the wound may be older than the moment. It may be time to RESET.*

Have you ever reacted strongly to something that seemed small?

Someone's tone changes, and suddenly you feel rejected. A friend does not return your call, and you immediately assume you have done something wrong. Your spouse asks a simple question, but you hear criticism. A supervisor offers feedback, and your mind races toward failure. Someone closes a door, raises an eyebrow, or uses a particular phrase, and something inside you changes before you understand why.

The present moment may have touched something from the past.

Sometimes the reaction is not entirely about the person standing in front of us. It is connected to someone who stood in front of us years ago. Today's conversation touches yesterday's wound, and yesterday's wound begins speaking for us.

But pain is not the only part of the past that can hold us back.

Sometimes we are trapped by a previous failure. We are so afraid of repeating it that we will not take another chance. Sometimes we are trapped by a previous season. We keep trying to recover what God has already completed. Sometimes we are trapped by a previous success. We insist on doing today's work with yesterday's methods because those methods once worked well.

Moses could not lead Israel with only the skills he used while tending sheep. David could not fight every future battle with a sling. Peter could not remain beside the fishing boats and still become the leader Christ was calling him to be. Joseph could not remain only Jacob's favored son. Every new season required growth.

The past can become a prison whether it was painful or wonderful. The enemy does not care whether we live in yesterday's suffering or yesterday's glory. Either one can keep us from today's purpose.

That is why we need to learn to RESET.

R — Recognize the Reaction

“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.”

—Psalm 139:23

“A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man quietly holds it back.”

—Proverbs 29:11

“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

—James 1:19

The first step in emotional regulation is not immediately fixing the emotion. It is recognizing that something is happening.

David repeatedly asked God to search his heart. He did not assume that everything he felt was accurate simply because he felt it strongly. He invited God into the places he could not clearly see by himself.

Recognizing the reaction means noticing what is happening before the reaction becomes a decision.

Perhaps your chest becomes tight. Your face feels warm. Your heart begins beating faster. You withdraw. You become defensive. You start rehearsing an argument. You feel the urge to send a message, leave the room, shut down, prove yourself, or strike back.

These physical and emotional signals are not necessarily proof that something terrible is happening. They are signals telling us to pay attention.

The Bible does not say we should never experience anger. It tells us to become slow enough that anger does not take over our words and behavior. Wisdom creates space between what we feel and what we do.

The Science

The amygdala plays an important role in emotional learning and in strengthening memories connected to emotionally significant experiences. Because emotional experiences are often remembered more strongly, something in the present can activate a learned alarm before we have consciously evaluated whether today's situation is truly the same as the earlier one.

The brain's alarm system is fast. Careful reasoning is slower.

That is why we sometimes feel the reaction in our bodies before we can explain it with words. The reaction is real, but our first interpretation of it may not tell the whole story.

Recognition allows us to say:

"I am having a strong reaction."

That is different from saying:

"My reaction proves that my worst fear is true."

We are not condemning ourselves. We are becoming aware.

RESET Question

What is happening inside me right now?

Consider:

- What emotion am I feeling?
- What is happening in my body?
- What am I tempted to do?
- Is my reaction larger than the present situation seems to require?

Practical Statement *I can notice this feeling without allowing it to make the decision.*

E — Examine the Root

“The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out.”

—Proverbs 20:5

“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?”

—Psalm 42:5

“Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord.”

—Lamentations 3:40

Scripture repeatedly shows people asking questions of their own hearts.

The psalmist did not merely announce, “I am upset.” He asked, “Why are you downcast?” That question created an opportunity for understanding.

Examining the root means becoming curious instead of immediately becoming critical. Rather than saying, “What is wrong with me?” we ask, “What happened to me, what did I learn from it, and what am I believing now?”

A strong reaction may be connected to an old experience of rejection, abandonment, humiliation, betrayal, instability, criticism, failure, or loss. It may also be connected to an old role we felt responsible to maintain.

Perhaps you became the strong one, the fixer, the achiever, the peacekeeper, the invisible one, the responsible one, or the person who never needed help. That identity may once have helped you survive a difficult season, but it may now prevent you from receiving, resting, trusting, or changing.

Sometimes the root is pain. Sometimes the root is fear. Sometimes the root is pride. Sometimes the root is an old promise we made to ourselves:

- “I will never trust anyone again.”
- “I will never let anyone see me struggle.”
- “I must always stay in control.”
- “I cannot afford to fail.”
- “If I am not needed, I am not valuable.”
- “I succeeded before by doing it this way, so I must always do it this way.”

God wants to address more than the visible reaction. He wants to reach the belief beneath it.

The Science

Emotional memories can influence how present experiences are interpreted, especially when a current cue resembles something connected to an earlier emotionally charged event. That can be protective, but it can also cause the brain to respond to a resemblance as though it were a repetition.

The present event and the past event do not have to be identical. A tone can be enough. A facial expression can be enough. A delayed response can be enough. A feeling of losing control can be enough. This does not mean every strong emotion comes from childhood or that every difficult reaction indicates deep trauma. It simply means that our present perceptions are influenced by what we have experienced and learned.

We examine the root so that we can distinguish between:

- what is happening now,
- what happened then,
- and what our mind is predicting will happen next.

The Joseph Connection

Joseph's brothers had betrayed him, stripped him of his robe, thrown him into a pit, sold him, and allowed their father to believe he was dead. Years later, those same brothers stood before Joseph, and the sight of them could have activated every memory. Joseph had power. He had opportunity. He had every human reason to punish them. But Joseph did not allow the pain of the pit to control the authority of the palace. He remembered what happened, but he was no longer governed by it.

RESET Question

How old is this feeling? Also ask:

- When have I felt this way before?
- What does this situation remind me of?
- What am I afraid is going to happen?
- What belief about myself, other people, or God is being activated?
- Am I responding to the person in front of me or to someone from my past?

Practical Statement *This feeling may have a history, but it does not automatically describe today's reality.*

S — Surrender the Story

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

—Genesis 50:20

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

—1 Peter 5:7

“Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.”

—Psalm 62:8

Joseph did not deny the harm. He did not call evil good. He did not say the betrayal did not matter. He said, in essence, “What you did was real, but what God did with it became greater.”

Surrendering the story does not mean surrendering to the people who hurt us. It means surrendering to God the right to define what the wound will mean for the rest of our lives.

We often carry a private interpretation of our past:

“Because they left, I am unlovable.”

“Because I failed, I am a failure.”

“Because I was betrayed, no one can be trusted.”

“Because that opportunity ended, my best days are behind me.”

“Because this method once succeeded, changing it would dishonor what I built.”

“Because I lost something, I will never feel secure again.”

The facts of the story may be accurate, while the conclusion we drew from them is not.

Joseph’s facts did not change. His brothers betrayed him. But his understanding of the story grew. The pit was not the end. The prison was not the end. The false accusation was not the end. God was still working in places Joseph could not yet see.

Surrender says:

“Lord, this is what happened. This is how it affected me. This is the meaning I gave it. Now I give You permission to show me what I could not see.”

The Science

When a memory is recalled, it is not necessarily functioning like a video recording played without change. Research on memory reconsolidation suggests that retrieved memories may become open to updating before being stored again. Scientists continue to study the exact boundaries and clinical implications of this process, but the central insight is hopeful: memory is dynamic rather than completely fixed.

Healing does not necessarily erase the factual memory.

Instead, the memory may become connected with new information:

“I survived.”

“I have choices now.”

“I am no longer powerless.”

“What happened was not my fault.”

“Their treatment of me did not determine my value.”

“God was present even when I could not sense Him.”

“My story continued.”

This is one reason honest prayer, wise pastoral care, and qualified counseling can be so valuable. They create a safe place to bring what was hidden into the light and connect an old experience with present truth.

For deeper wounds, working with a trained Christian counselor or a properly licensed therapist—including one trained in evidence-based trauma treatment or EMDR—can be a gift. Seeking skilled help is not a lack of faith. It is one way of stewarding the mind and life God has entrusted to us.

RESET Question

What story have I been telling myself about what happened?

Ask:

- Which parts are facts?
- Which parts are interpretations?
- What conclusion did I draw about myself?
- What conclusion did I draw about other people?
- What conclusion did I draw about God?
- Is that conclusion consistent with Scripture?

Practical Statement *I cannot change what happened, but I can surrender the meaning and the outcome to God.*

E — Embrace God's Truth

“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

—John 8:32

“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable...think about such things.”

—Philippians 4:8

Surrender creates an open space. Truth must fill it. It is not enough to stop believing an old lie. We need something true to take its place.

When an old wound says, “You are unwanted,” God’s truth says that you are chosen and loved. When failure says, “You will never recover,” Scripture says that God’s mercies are new every morning. When betrayal says, “You can never trust anyone,” wisdom says trust may need to be rebuilt carefully, but fear does not have to isolate you forever.

When past success says, “Your greatest season is behind you,” God says He is still doing a new thing. When shame says, “You are what happened to you,” the gospel says your identity is found in Christ.

Embracing truth is more than repeating pleasant words. It means deliberately bringing our interpretation into agreement with God’s character and Word.

Joseph embraced a larger truth. His brothers had made real choices, but their choices were not greater than God’s providence.

David did the same in the cave. Saul had hunted him, falsely accused him, and repeatedly tried to kill him. Yet when David had the opportunity to take revenge, he refused to let Saul’s behavior determine David’s character. David could not control whether Saul acted like a king. David could control whether David acted like a man after God’s heart.

That is emotional regulation at its deepest level:

I will not allow what you did to decide who I become.

The Science

Cognitive reappraisal is an emotion-regulation strategy in which a person changes how a situation is interpreted in order to change its emotional impact. Research distinguishes reappraisal from merely suppressing outward emotion. Suppression may hide an expression without changing the internal meaning of the event, while reappraisal works earlier by reconsidering the meaning itself.

Biblical reframing is not pretending that a painful event was harmless.

It is not saying:

“It did not hurt.”

“It was not wrong.”

“I should be over it.”

Instead, it says:

“This hurt, but it does not define me.”

“This was wrong, but I will not become what wounded me.”

“This chapter mattered, but God is still writing.”

“I may need boundaries, but I do not need revenge.”

“I may grieve what was lost, but I will not assume that nothing good remains.”

The brain remains capable of adaptation and change across the lifespan. Neuroplasticity refers broadly to the nervous system’s capacity to alter its functioning and organization in response to experience, learning, and practice. This does not mean every wound heals quickly, but it does mean old patterns are not necessarily permanent. Every time we pause, identify an old interpretation, and choose a truthful response, we are practicing a different pathway.

RESET Question

What is true now—and what does God say?

Ask:

- What lie is this wound repeating?
- What Scripture speaks to that lie?
- What has changed since the original event?
- What choices and resources do I have now?
- What is true about God’s presence, character, and purpose?

Scripture Replacement Examples

Old story: “I was rejected, so I must not be worth loving.”

God’s truth: Nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ.

Reference: Romans 8:38–39

Old story: “I failed once, so I will fail again.”

God’s truth: Though the righteous fall, they rise again.

Reference: Proverbs 24:16

Old story: “I must stay in control or everything will fall apart.”

God’s truth: I can trust the Lord and acknowledge Him in my decisions.

Reference: Proverbs 3:5–6

Old story: “My best days are behind me.”

God’s truth: God can do a new thing and create a way where I cannot yet see one.

Reference: Isaiah 43:18–19

Old story: “Because this worked before, it is the only way forward.”

God’s truth: There is a season for every activity, and God gives wisdom for each new season.

Reference: Ecclesiastes 3:1; James 1:5

Practical Statement *I will not build today’s response on yesterday’s lie. I will build it on God’s truth.*

T — Take the Next Faithful Step

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!”

—Isaiah 43:18–19

“Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal.”

—Philippians 3:13–14

“Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.”

—Psalm 119:105

“Do not merely listen to the word...Do what it says.”

—James 1:22

Emotional healing is not completed by insight alone.

We can understand why we react the way we do and still remain stuck. Eventually, truth must become a step.

God often gives us a lamp for the next part of the path, not a floodlight showing the entire journey.

The next faithful step may be:

- waiting before sending the message,
- asking a clarifying question,
- apologizing for an unfair reaction,
- setting a healthy boundary,
- having an honest conversation,
- releasing an old role,
- trying a new approach,
- grieving what ended,
- accepting help,
- scheduling counseling,
- applying for the opportunity,
- trusting someone in a wise and gradual way,
- or admitting that yesterday's success cannot become tomorrow's strategy.

Joseph's healing became visible in what he did. He spoke to his brothers. He acknowledged the harm. He recognized God's hand. He provided for his family. He moved from interpretation to action.

David's restraint also became an action. He stepped away from revenge. Paul pressed forward. Peter left the boat. Abraham departed without seeing the entire plan.

Faith often appears as one obedient step taken while some uncertainty remains.

The Science

Emotion-regulation strategies that create psychological or temporal distance can reduce distress by helping a person view an experience from a wider perspective rather than remaining fully immersed in it. Studies have found that distancing can reduce the intensity or duration of emotional responses in some settings, though it should not be treated as a substitute for appropriate trauma treatment where deeper care is needed.

Taking a measured step also gives the brain new evidence.

The old belief may say:

"If I speak honestly, I will be rejected."

A healthy conversation may provide new evidence that honesty can be received.

The old belief may say:

"If I try again, failure will destroy me."

One manageable attempt provides evidence that disappointment can be survived.

The old belief may say:

"If I do not control everything, disaster will follow."

Allowing someone trustworthy to help provides evidence that shared responsibility can be safe.

New experiences do not erase the past, but they can teach the brain that the past is not the only possible outcome.

RESET Question

What is the next faithful step—not the entire solution?

Ask:

- What can I do today?
- Is there a conversation I need to delay until I am regulated?
- Is there a conversation I need to stop avoiding?
- Do I need a boundary, an apology, support, or a new plan?
- What would obedience look like in this moment?
- Am I trying to repeat a previous success instead of following God into a new season?

Practical Statement *I do not have to solve my entire past today. I only need to take the next faithful step.*

Part Two — Putting RESET to Work

The RESET Practice

When you notice an emotion that feels larger than the moment, walk through these five steps.

R — Recognize the reaction. “What is happening inside me?”

E — Examine the root. “How old is this feeling?”

S — Surrender the story. “What meaning have I attached to what happened?”

E — Embrace God’s truth. “What is true now, and what does God say?”

T — Take the next faithful step. “What is the next faithful step—not the entire solution?”

A Real-Life RESET

Imagine that your supervisor asks to speak with you privately.

Immediately, your stomach tightens. Your mind begins racing. You assume you are in trouble. You become defensive before the conversation even begins.

Recognize: “I am feeling afraid, and my body is preparing for bad news.”

Examine: “This reminds me of a previous job where I was unexpectedly criticized and embarrassed.”

Surrender: “I have been telling myself that every private meeting means I am about to be attacked or rejected.”

Embrace: “That happened before, but it is not happening right now. I am capable, I am not powerless, and I can listen before reaching a conclusion.”

Take the next faithful step: “I will breathe, enter the conversation calmly, listen carefully, and ask questions before responding.”

The meeting may still contain difficult feedback. RESET does not guarantee that every situation will be pleasant.

It helps us meet today’s reality without allowing yesterday’s fear to write the response in advance.

When Success Becomes the Old Story

Not every RESET begins with a wound. Sometimes we need to RESET because we have become too attached to a former version of ourselves. Perhaps you built something successful, but the season has changed. Perhaps you were once known for a particular role, but God is calling you into another. Perhaps you continue comparing every new opportunity with the greatest accomplishment of your past. Perhaps you are trying to reproduce an old experience rather than receive a new one.

Ask:

Recognize: Why am I resisting this change?

Examine: Am I afraid that changing direction will make my earlier work less valuable?

Surrender: Have I made my former success part of my identity?

Embrace: God's faithfulness in the past is evidence that I can trust Him in the future—not a command to remain in the past.

Take the next faithful step: What new skill, method, relationship, or act of obedience does this season require?

A previous victory should become a foundation, not a ceiling.

We honor what God did yesterday by trusting what He is doing today.

Boundaries and Forgiveness

RESET does not require returning to unsafe relationships. Joseph forgave, but he also tested his brothers before fully revealing himself. David refused to kill Saul, but he did not move back into Saul's house and pretend the danger had disappeared.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are related, but they are not identical. Forgiveness can begin within one heart. Reconciliation requires truth, repentance, rebuilding, and participation from both sides.

Emotional regulation does not mean becoming easier to mistreat. It means becoming wise enough that neither fear nor revenge controls the decision.

Sometimes the next faithful step is reconnection. Sometimes it is distance. Sometimes it is a boundary. Sometimes it is professional help.

The goal is not to make every relationship return to what it was. The goal is to let God direct what it should become.

Weekly Challenge: The RESET Journal

Use this whenever a strong reaction occurs.

What happened?

Describe only the observable facts.

What did I feel?

Name the emotions and physical sensations.

What did I immediately assume?

Write the first story your mind produced.

How old did this feeling seem?

Identify any similar past experience.

What lie or old rule appeared?

For example: “I must defend myself,” “I am being abandoned,” or “I cannot fail.”

What does Scripture say?

Choose one truth that speaks directly to the old belief.

What is my next faithful step?

Choose one action rather than trying to fix everything at once.

Closing Truth

Your past deserves honesty, but it does not deserve control.

Some things that happened to you were deeply wrong. Some losses changed you. Some failures humbled you. Some successes helped build the person you are today.

But none of those chapters has the right to take God's pen out of His hand.

Joseph remembered the pit, but he did not live in it.

David remembered Saul's spear, but he did not become Saul.

Paul remembered his former life, but he continued pressing forward.

Peter remembered his denial, but he still answered Christ's call to feed His sheep.

The past can inform you without imprisoning you. It can teach you without controlling you. It can become part of your testimony without remaining the author of your identity.

When yesterday tries to drive today, pause and RESET.

Recognize the reaction.

Examine the root.

Surrender the story.

Embrace God's truth.

Take the next faithful step.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You that nothing in my past is beyond Your reach. Help me recognize when an old wound, an old fear, an old failure, or even an old success is influencing the way I respond today.

Search my heart. Reveal the roots beneath my reactions. Give me courage to bring my full story into Your presence without hiding, minimizing, or pretending.

I surrender what happened, what I lost, what I believed, and what I decided about myself because of it. Teach me to see my life through Your truth.

Renew my mind. Heal the places that still hurt. Help me release the seasons You have completed and trust You with the season in front of me.

Show me my next faithful step. May I respond to today's people with today's wisdom instead of yesterday's pain. May my past become a testimony of Your faithfulness rather than a barrier to my future.

In Jesus' name, amen.

WEEK 5

CATCH

The Lies We Rehearse

CATCH

The Lies We Rehearse:

Familiar Is Not the Same as True

Barrier: Familiar falsehoods we repeat until they begin to feel like facts.

Central truth: We say things about ourselves so often that we stop asking whether they are even true.

Truth line: *Familiar thoughts are not always truthful thoughts.*

Roses are red, Violets are blue.

We have heard it so many times that we repeat it without thinking. But violets are not usually blue. They are violet. The sentence feels right because it is familiar, not because it is completely accurate.

Francine Shapiro used this simple idea to illustrate how easily something can become accepted when it is repeated often enough. We hear a statement, rehearse it, and eventually stop examining it. The same thing can happen with the things we say about ourselves.

- “I always ruin everything.”
- “No one really wants me around.”
- “I am not good enough.”
- “I cannot change.”
- “I am too old.”
- “If I am not perfect, I am a failure.”
- “I am too young.”
- “I am just an anxious person.”
- “I have never been good with people.”
- “Nothing ever works out for me.”
- “I have to keep everyone happy.”

We repeat these sentences so often that they stop sounding like thoughts and start sounding like facts. But repetition does not make a thought true. Familiar is not the same as factual. A thought can be old, automatic, emotionally powerful, and completely wrong.

Some thoughts wait for something to happen. Someone criticizes us. A plan falls apart. A familiar situation returns, and the old reaction arrives with it. That is the ground we covered last week.

The thoughts we are examining now do not wait for anything. They run while we are driving, while we are folding laundry, and at two in the morning when nothing at all is happening. No one has to say anything. Nothing has to go wrong. The sentence simply plays, the way a song plays when we did not choose it.

That is what makes a rehearsed thought different. It is not a reaction to today. It is the commentary running underneath every day.

A passing thought is one thing. A rehearsed thought is something else. Rehearsal means we return to the same thought repeatedly. We repeat it in our minds, use it to explain new situations, and allow it to shape our decisions.

A woman makes one mistake and thinks:

“I always mess things up.”

A man experiences rejection and concludes:

“No one will ever stay.”

A child struggles in one subject and begins believing:

“I am stupid.”

A leader faces resistance and decides:

“I must not be called to do this.”

A successful person enters a new season and thinks:

“I will never be as useful as I once was.”

The thought may begin as a reaction to one experience. Over time, it becomes a lens through which every new experience is interpreted.

This is why Scripture places so much emphasis on the mind. Paul did not tell believers to believe every thought. He told them to take thoughts captive. He did not say transformation comes by trying harder to behave. He said we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. God cares about the sentences we rehearse because thoughts influence emotions, choices, relationships, habits, and expectations.

We do not have to be frightened by every negative thought that enters our minds. Thoughts come and go. The question is not whether a thought appeared. The question is whether we will agree with it, rehearse it, and allow it to lead us. This week, we are going to learn how to CATCH the lies we rehearse before they become the life we live.

The Brain: Thoughts Build Roads

The brain becomes more efficient at what it repeatedly does.

Donald Hebb, an early researcher in the science of learning, described a principle that is often summarized this way:

Neurons that fire together wire together. When a thought, emotion, and response occur together repeatedly, the brain becomes more likely to travel that same path again. Imagine walking across a field of tall grass. The first time, the path is difficult. You have to push through the grass and decide where to step. Walk the same route every day, and a visible trail begins to form. Continue walking it, and eventually the path becomes wide, familiar, and easy to follow.

Repeated thoughts work in a similar way. The thought “I cannot handle this” may begin as one anxious response. But if we repeat it every time life becomes difficult, the brain learns to reach for that sentence quickly. The thought becomes automatic because we have practiced it. That does not mean the thought is true. It means the pathway is well traveled.

The hopeful news is that the brain remains capable of change. This ability is called neuroplasticity. Researchers such as Michael Merzenich have helped demonstrate that the brain continues adapting in response to what we repeatedly practice and pay attention to. Old pathways can weaken and new pathways can grow, but the brain usually changes through deliberate, repeated practice, not through one inspiring moment.

Renewing the mind is not pretending. It is training. It is noticing the old road, choosing not to travel it, and repeatedly practicing a truthful path until truth becomes more familiar than the lie. Later in this journey, when we come to the turning point of the whole study, we will see why willpower alone does not hold — and where the power to build a new road actually comes from. For now, it is enough to know two things. The road exists because we built it, and we are able to build another one.

C — Catch the Thought

“We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

—2 Corinthians 10:5

“Be alert and of sober mind.”

—1 Peter 5:8

“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”

—Proverbs 4:23

We cannot challenge a thought we have not noticed.

Many of our most influential thoughts move through the mind so quickly that we barely hear them. Something happens, and almost instantly we think:

“Here we go again.”

“They do not respect me.”

“I knew this would fail.”

“I am not safe.”

“I do not belong here.”

“I will never get this right.”

The thought appears so quickly that it feels like reality.

Catching the thought means slowing down long enough to hear the actual sentence running through the mind.

Instead of saying:

“I feel terrible.”

Ask:

“What did I just tell myself?”

Instead of saying:

“This situation is hopeless.”

Ask:

“What sentence made it feel hopeless?”

Emotions can help us locate the thought. When shame appears, there may be a thought about identity. When anxiety appears, there may be a prediction about the future. When anger appears, there may be a thought about injustice, control, or disrespect. When sadness appears, there may be a thought about loss, rejection, or permanence.

The emotion is not always the enemy. Sometimes it is the signal that helps us find the sentence beneath it.

The Absolute Words

There is a simple way to find a rehearsed thought. Listen for the absolute words.

Always. Never. Everyone. Nobody. Nothing. Ruin. Failure.

Rehearsed lies are almost always stated as totals. “I always ruin everything” contains two of them, and “No one really wants me around” contains another. A careful thought usually sounds smaller: “That meeting went badly,” or “I was not prepared for that conversation.”

When you hear one of the absolute words in your own head, stop. You have probably found a sentence you have been rehearsing.

The Science

Automatic thoughts often arise quickly and with little deliberate effort. Because the brain favors familiar and efficient pathways, a rehearsed interpretation may appear before we have carefully evaluated it.

This is why awareness is so important.

Naming a thought creates a small amount of distance between the person and the thought.

Instead of saying:

“I am a failure,”

we can say:

“I am having the thought that I am a failure.”

That small change reminds us that a thought is something occurring in the mind. It is not necessarily a final description of reality.

CATCH Question

What did I just tell myself?

Ask:

- What exact sentence went through my mind?
- What happened immediately before it?
- What emotion followed it?
- Is this a new thought or a familiar one?

Practical Statement *A thought can enter my mind without earning my agreement.*

A — Ask How Often I Say It

“The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”

—*Proverbs 18:21*

“For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”

—*Matthew 12:34*

“May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord.”

—*Psalms 19:14*

Once we catch a thought, the next question is not where it came from. We looked at origins last week, when we asked how old a feeling was and whose voice we first heard it in. This week the question is simpler, and for most of us it is also more uncomfortable.

How often do I say this?

Most people believe their worst sentence about themselves comes up occasionally. Then they begin counting, and they discover it came up eleven times before lunch.

That number matters. A thought we entertain once a month is not shaping us. A thought we repeat forty times a day is writing the way we see ourselves, and we never noticed it happening.

This is why Scripture pays such close attention to what we say. Proverbs tells us the tongue carries the power of life and death. Jesus said the mouth speaks out of what fills the heart. Most of us apply those verses to the way we talk about other people. We rarely apply them to the sentences we say about ourselves, and those are the sentences we say most often.

We are not usually aware of how much we are saying. So we count.

You do not need a system. A mark on a note card, a tap in your phone, or a tally in the margin of a notebook will do. Every time the sentence appears, record it. Do not argue with it yet. Do not correct it yet. Just count it.

Counting does something teaching cannot do. You can disagree with a teacher. It is difficult to disagree with your own tally at the end of a Tuesday.

There is a second question worth asking alongside the count.

What has this sentence been allowed to explain?

A rehearsed thought does not only repeat. It interprets. It steps in and explains the unanswered message, the change in tone, the missed opportunity, the difficult season. Notice how many different situations you have handed to the same sentence.

The Science

The brain favors what it practices. A sentence repeated many times a day is not simply being remembered. It is being rehearsed, and rehearsal is what keeps the pathway wide and fast.

Counting also does something useful on its own. It moves the thought from the background to the foreground. A sentence we are tracking is no longer running unnoticed, and a thought we can see is a thought we can question.

CATCH Question

How many times have I said this today?

Ask:

- What is the exact sentence I am counting?
- When during the day does it appear most often?
- What was happening just before it appeared?
- How many different situations have I allowed it to explain?
- Am I surprised by the number?

Practical Statement *I cannot measure what I have never counted.*

T — Test It Against Truth

“Test everything; hold on to what is good.”

—1 Thessalonians 5:21

“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”

—John 17:17

Not every thought deserves to be believed simply because it feels convincing.

We test our thoughts against truth.

The first question is not:

“Does this feel true?”

The question is:

“Is this actually true?”

A feeling can be sincere and still be based on an inaccurate conclusion. You may feel unwanted without being unwanted. You may feel incapable without being incapable. You may feel forgotten without being forgotten by God. You may feel that nothing has changed when change is already beginning.

Testing a thought requires honesty.

Suppose the thought is:

“I always ruin everything.”

Test it.

- Have you truly ruined everything?
- Can you name anything you handled well?
- Have you ever apologized, repaired something, learned, or grown?
- Would you use the word always if you were describing someone you loved?
- Does Scripture describe you as permanently ruined, or as someone who can be renewed?

The purpose is not to excuse real responsibility. If we made a mistake, truth may require us to admit it. But truth is usually more specific and less condemning than the lie.

The lie says:

“I am a terrible person.”

Truth may say:

“I made a hurtful choice. I need to apologize and respond differently.”

The lie attacks identity. Truth identifies the behavior and opens the door to change.

The Grasshopper Report

Twelve men went into Canaan to look at the land. Ten of them came back and gave a report that included a sentence nobody had asked them for.

“We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”

—*Numbers 13:33*

Read that sentence carefully. The first half is a feeling. They felt small. That part was honest.

The second half is something else entirely. They had no way of knowing what the Canaanites thought of them. They had not spoken with them. They had no information at all. They took how they felt about themselves and reported it as what other people saw. And Israel believed it.

A nation spent forty years in the wilderness on the strength of a sentence that was never tested. Not because the giants were imaginary. The giants were real. But the report went further than the facts, and no one stopped to separate the two.

When the Lie Contains a Little Truth

Some lies are powerful because they contain a piece of truth.

“I failed, so I am a failure.”

The truthful part: “I failed.”

The lie: “Failure defines my identity.”

“I was rejected, so no one will ever love me.”

The truthful part: “I experienced rejection.”

The lie: “Every future relationship will end the same way.”

“I handled that badly, so I ruin everything.”

The truthful part: “I handled that badly.”

The lie: “One response describes everything I do.”

“I succeeded because I did everything myself, so I cannot trust anyone else.”

The truthful part: “I worked very hard and accomplished something significant.”

The lie: “I must always work alone to remain successful.”

We do not renew the mind by denying the truthful part. We separate the fact from the false conclusion. Truth says, “Yes, this happened,” and, “No, it does not mean everything the lie says it means.”

The Science

The brain often uses shortcuts when interpreting information. It may overgeneralize from one event, focus only on negative evidence, predict the worst outcome, or assume we know what someone else is thinking.

A familiar thought becomes especially convincing when we notice only the evidence that supports it. If we believe “No one cares about me,” we may focus on the one person who did not call and overlook the three people who reached out. If we believe “I always fail,” we may replay one disappointment while dismissing years of faithfulness.

Testing a thought interrupts this automatic pattern. It asks the brain to slow down and examine more of the evidence.

When a Truth Test Is Not the Answer

Everything in this lesson assumes a mind that is able to examine itself. Sometimes it is not.

Depression is not a rehearsal problem. When hopelessness is constant rather than occasional, when it does not lift with rest or truth or good news, when a person loses interest in what they once loved, cannot sleep or cannot get out of bed, and carries a heaviness that has no particular subject, that is not a sentence that needs correcting. That is a condition that needs care.

Handing someone in that place a truth card can do real harm. They will try it, it will not work, and they will add one more failure to a list that is already too long.

If this describes you, please talk with your doctor or a licensed counselor. If your thoughts have turned toward not wanting to be here, tell someone today and do not wait. Seeking skilled help is not a lack of faith. It is one way of stewarding the mind and life God has entrusted to us.

The Truth Test

Use these questions:

- Is it completely true?
- Is it specific—or does it use extreme words?
- What evidence supports it?
- What evidence does not support it?
- Am I describing a behavior or condemning my identity?
- Would I say this to someone I love?
- Does this agree with Scripture?
- Does this reflect God's character?

Examples

Familiar thought: “I always ruin everything.”

Tested truth: “I made a mistake in this situation, but I have handled many other things well. I can take responsibility and learn.”

Familiar thought: “No one wants me.”

Tested truth: “I feel rejected by one person right now, but one person’s response does not define my worth or every relationship.”

Familiar thought: “I cannot change.”

Tested truth: “Change may be difficult and gradual, but God renews minds, and the brain can learn new patterns.”

Familiar thought: “My best years are behind me.”

Tested truth: “Some seasons have ended, but God’s purpose for my life has not ended.”

CATCH Question

Is this completely true, and does it agree with Scripture?

Practical Statement *Strong feelings deserve compassion, but strong feelings still need truth.*

C — Choose the True Statement

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

—*Romans 12:2*

“You were taught...to be made new in the attitude of your minds.”

—*Ephesians 4:22–23*

“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”

—*Colossians 3:2*

“The mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.”

—*Romans 8:6*

Taking a thought captive does not end with identifying what is false.

We must choose what is true.

The mind does not renew itself simply because we say:

“I should stop thinking negatively.”

We need a specific truth to practice in place of the lie.

This is not positive thinking.

Positive thinking may say: “Everything is going to be perfect.”

Truth says: “Whatever happens, God will be with me, and I will have wisdom for the next step.”

Positive thinking may say: “I will never fail.”

Truth says: “Failure is possible, but failure is not final. I can learn, recover, and grow.”

Positive thinking may say: “Everyone will approve of me.”

Truth says: “I cannot control everyone’s opinion, but I can live with integrity before God.”

Positive thinking tries to replace pain with pleasant words. Biblical renewal replaces falsehood with reality rooted in God's character, Scripture, and present evidence.

The replacement statement should be believable, specific, and truthful. If a person has believed "I am worthless" for forty years, jumping immediately to "I am the most confident person in the world" may feel false. A more truthful statement may be:

"My worth is not determined by how I was treated. I am created by God, loved by Him, and capable of growing."

Truth does not need to be exaggerated to be powerful.

The Science

When we deliberately choose a different interpretation, we begin practicing a new mental pathway. At first, the new statement may feel awkward because the old thought has been rehearsed more often. The old road feels natural. The new road requires attention.

That does not mean the new thought is ineffective. It means it is new. Every time we interrupt the old pattern and choose the truthful statement, we give the brain another opportunity to strengthen the new pathway.

Building a Truth Statement

A helpful replacement statement should do three things:

- Acknowledge reality.
- Reject the false conclusion.
- Affirm God's truth and the next possibility.

For example:

"I am disappointed that this did not work, but one disappointment does not mean I am a failure. God can teach me and guide my next step."

"I feel rejected, but another person's decision does not determine my value. I remain loved by God and connected to people who care about me."

"I am anxious about this conversation, but anxiety is not prophecy. I can listen, breathe, pray, and respond with wisdom."

"I have used this method successfully before, but God may be leading me into a new way of working. Changing does not erase what I accomplished."

CATCH Question

What is the most truthful statement I can choose?

Ask:

- What part of this situation is real?
- What conclusion is false?
- What does Scripture say about my identity?
- What does Scripture say about God's character?
- What is true about my choices today?
- What statement would lead me toward wisdom rather than fear?

Practical Statement *I will not merely silence the lie. I will give my mind something true to practice.*

H — Habituate the Truth

“Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night.”

—Joshua 1:8

“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”

—Psalm 119:11

“These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them...”

—Deuteronomy 6:6–7

“Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of.”

—2 Timothy 3:14

To habituate something means to practice it until it becomes familiar. We did not develop most of our old thought patterns in one day, and we will not replace them through one repetition. The old lie became powerful because it was rehearsed. Truth becomes more accessible when it is rehearsed too.

This is why Scripture repeatedly tells us to meditate, remember, speak, write, teach, and return to God’s Word. Biblical meditation is not emptying the mind. It is filling the mind with truth and returning to that truth until it becomes deeply rooted.

God told Joshua to meditate on His Word day and night. Deuteronomy instructed families to talk about God’s commands at home, on the road, when lying down, and when getting up. The psalmist hid God’s Word in his heart.

Repetition is not a lack of faith. Repetition is part of formation. We repeat the truth because the old lie has had years of practice.

Elijah Said It Twice

We met Elijah earlier, collapsed under the broom tree, where God tended his exhausted body before He ever addressed his heart. Now look a little further down that same chapter, because Elijah shows us something new here — not a depleted body this time, but a rehearsed thought. He was still convinced he was the last one standing, and he said so.

“I am the only one left.”

God did not argue with him. God let him sleep, fed him, and let him sleep again. Then Elijah traveled to the mountain, and God asked him what he was doing there. Elijah answered.

“I am the only one left.”

The same sentence, word for word, after rest and food and the wind and the earthquake and the fire. God finally answered the sentence itself. Seven thousand. There were seven thousand others, and Elijah had never known.

Notice what it took. Rest did not remove the sentence. One correction did not remove it either. Elijah had rehearsed “I am alone” long enough that it survived everything, until God replaced it with a number. If you catch the same lie tomorrow that you caught today, you are not doing this badly. You are doing it the way Elijah did.

The Science

Repeated attention strengthens learning. The brain changes according to what it practices consistently. When we repeatedly notice an old thought, interrupt it, and return to a truthful statement, we are training the mind to respond differently.

The old pathway may still appear, and that does not mean we have failed. A person may catch the same lie one hundred times. Catching it one hundred times is not defeat. It is one hundred opportunities to choose truth.

Over time, the old thought may become less automatic, less believable, or less emotionally powerful. The goal is not to guarantee that a negative thought never appears again. The goal is to become so practiced in truth that the lie no longer receives immediate authority.

Ways to Habituate Truth

- Write the truth statement on a card.
- Place it where you will see it.
- Connect it to a specific Scripture.
- Say it aloud when the old thought appears.
- Pray it.
- Journal it.
- Discuss it with a trusted friend.
- Set a reminder on your phone.
- Repeat it before entering a difficult situation.
- Review it at the end of the day.
- Track moments when the old lie appeared and truth changed your response.

CATCH Question

How will I practice this truth until it becomes familiar?

Ask:

- Which Scripture will I return to?
- Where will I write it?
- When is the lie most likely to appear?
- What reminder can I create?
- Who can help reinforce the truth?
- What evidence of growth can I record?

Practical Statement *The old lie may be familiar, but I can make truth familiar too.*

Part Two — Putting CATCH to Work

The Complete CATCH Process

When a familiar lie begins running through your mind, pause and CATCH it.

C — Catch the thought. “What did I just tell myself?”

A — Ask how often I say it. “How many times have I said this today?”

T — Test it against truth. “Is this completely true, and does it agree with Scripture?”

C — Choose the true statement. “What is the most truthful statement I can choose?”

H — Habituate the truth. “How will I practice this until truth becomes familiar?”

A Real-Life CATCH

A woman has two people asking for the same Saturday. Her mother expects her at a family gathering. Her closest friend has planned something they have both looked forward to for weeks. Before she has thought about either one, a sentence arrives.

“Someone is going to be angry with me, and it will be my fault.”

Catch: She notices the sentence and hears the absolute inside it. Someone. It is always someone.

Ask: She writes the sentence on a card and marks it every time it appears. By Wednesday night she has nine marks. She also notices that the same sentence explained why she stayed late at work, why she did not return a call, and why she volunteered for something she did not want.

Test: She asks whether it is completely true. It is true that one person may be disappointed. It is not true that disappointment is the same as anger, or that another adult’s feelings are her fault. She notices that the sentence condemns her identity rather than describing a choice.

Choose: “I cannot be in two places, and one of these people will be disappointed. Disappointing someone is not the same as failing them, and I am allowed to make a decision.”

Habituate: She writes the statement beside Galatians 1:10 and reads it before she makes the phone call.

The Seven-Day CATCH Challenge

For the next seven days, choose one familiar thought to examine. Do not try to correct every thought at once. Choose the sentence you hear most often, write it at the top of a page, and then work through CATCH.

Catch: What is the exact sentence?

Ask: How many times did it appear today? Keep a running tally.

Test: What facts and Scriptures challenge it?

Choose: What is the new truthful statement?

Habituate: How will I practice it every day?

At the end of each day, record:

- How many times the old thought appeared
- When it appeared
- What emotion came with it
- Whether you caught it
- Which truth you chose
- What changed in your response

The goal is not perfection.

The goal is awareness and practice.

Reference: Common Lies and Scriptural Truth

Keep this page for the weeks ahead. Look up the full passage rather than relying on the line alone.

Familiar thought

Scripture and truthful replacement

“I am not enough.”

2 Corinthians 12:9 — My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

“I do not have to be sufficient by myself. God’s grace is sufficient, and I can grow in the areas where I need help.”

“Everyone will leave.”

Hebrews 13:5 — Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.

“Some people have left, and that hurt deeply. But abandonment is not the only possible outcome, and God remains with me.”

“My past disqualifies me.”

2 Corinthians 5:17 — If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come.

“My past is part of my story, but in Christ it does not have the final word.”

“I must keep everyone happy.”

Galatians 1:10 — Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God?

“I can be loving and respectful without making myself responsible for everyone’s emotions.”

“If I cannot do it perfectly, I should not do it.”

Colossians 3:23 — Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.

“God asks for faithfulness, not flawless performance. I can begin, learn, and improve.”

Closing Truth

You have repeated some thoughts for so long that they may feel like part of your identity.

But you are not every thought you have entertained.

You are not every sentence spoken over you.

You are not every conclusion you formed in pain.

You are not every prediction fear makes about your future.

A familiar thought is not necessarily a faithful thought. A loud thought is not necessarily a truthful thought. An old thought is not necessarily a permanent thought.

God has given you the ability to notice what you are thinking, test it against His Word, and practice something new.

The lie may have a head start. It may have been repeated for years. It may still be the first sentence that appears. But the first thought does not have to become the final thought.

Catch it.

Ask how often you say it.

Test it against truth. Choose what is true.

Habituate that truth until the mind begins traveling a new road.

Transformation rarely happens because we heard truth once. It happens as truth becomes what we return to.

Familiar thoughts are not always truthful thoughts.

And through the renewing work of God, truth can become familiar too.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You that I do not have to believe every thought that enters my mind.

Show me the lies I have rehearsed until they began to feel like facts. Help me recognize the sentences that shape my emotions, choices, relationships, and expectations.

Reveal where those thoughts began. Give me compassion for the places in me that learned to expect pain, rejection, failure, or loss. But do not let understanding become an excuse to remain unchanged.

Teach me to test every thought against Your Word.

Where I have sinned, lead me to repentance.

Where I have been wounded, lead me toward healing.

Where I have believed a lie, lead me into truth.

Renew my mind.

Help me choose truthful statements that reflect Your character, my identity in Christ, and the reality of the present moment.

Give me patience as I practice new ways of thinking. When the old lie returns, remind me that its return does not mean I have failed. It is simply another opportunity to take the thought captive.

May Your truth become more familiar than fear.

May Your voice become louder than shame.

May my mind become increasingly governed by Your Spirit, producing life and peace.

In Jesus' name, amen.

The Turn

From Our Strength to His

One of the most amazing truths of the Christian life is that we are in partnership with God. We are not alone. We have not been abandoned, and we are not left to find our way through life in our own strength.

When the pressures of life close in, we may feel as though we are floundering or have lost our way. But when we fix our eyes on Jesus—the author and perfecter of our faith—our focus begins to change. We turn from self-reliance to dependence on God, trusting His wisdom, His power, and His presence.

This is where life begins to change. Through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, we have been given access to everything we need to walk with God and become who He created us to be. Moving from our strength to His does not mean that we stop participating. It means that we no longer carry alone what we were always meant to carry with Him.

WEEK 6

The Turn

From Our Strength to His

From Removing Barriers to Resting in the Anchor: Peter, Before and After

Emotional Regulation · Week 6 · Scripture quotations: New International Version (NIV)

Barrier / Anchor: Self-effort — trying to regulate our emotions in our own strength, the way Peter reached for his own sword.

Central truth: Emotional regulation is not manufactured by our effort. It is empowered by our life anchored in God, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Truth line: *Our security, identity, acceptance, and approval flow from God — and that is what steadies us.*

What Is in This Lesson

Part One — The Teaching

- A Look Back: The Five Barriers
- The Turn: From Effort to Anchor
- Peter and His Own Sword
- The Night Peter's Strength Ran Out
- Peter After the Resurrection
- The Anchor: Where Regulation Actually Comes From

Part Two — Putting It to Work

- Naming Your Own Sword
- Four Anchors to Come
- Walking It Out This Week
- Closing Truth and Closing Prayer

A Look Back: The Five Barriers

Before we take the next step, let's pause and look at the ground we have covered. For five weeks, we have been naming and removing the barriers to emotional regulation—the things that cause us to react rather than respond with wisdom and intention.

We began with the PAUSE — learning to find the space between what we feel and what we do, so that emotion no longer makes the decision before wisdom can speak. That was the first barrier: reacting instead of responding.

Then we looked at the overloaded plate — carrying more than God ever handed us, until the sheer weight left no room to respond with grace. We learned to SIFT what was ours to carry from what we picked up on our own.

We ran the HEART check — discovering how often what looks like an emotional problem is really a neglected need. Hungry, exhausted, angry, disconnected, distant from God — needs that quietly set us up to react.

We learned to RESET — recognizing when an old wound is bleeding into a present moment, so that we respond to what is actually in front of us rather than to something long past.

And we learned to CATCH the lies we rehearse — the familiar sentences we repeat until they begin to feel like facts, and how to test them against the truth of God's Word.

Five barriers. Five ways we learned to clear the path. And all of it was good and necessary work.

But if you have been honest with yourself these past weeks, you may have noticed something. Even with the tools, the pausing is hard. The lies come back. The plate refills. We know what to do, and we still find ourselves reaching, straining, trying to hold it all together by sheer effort. And we get tired.

The Turn: From Effort to Anchor

There is a reason for that, and this week is where we turn to face it.

Everything we have done so far could quietly become one more thing we do in our own strength.

We can turn the pause into a technique we grasp. We can turn the truth-testing into a performance we manage. We can turn emotional regulation itself into a project we are responsible for succeeding at.

And if that is all it is — self-improvement by willpower — it will eventually fail us. Our own strength always runs out.

So we turn a corner here. For five weeks we asked what barriers stand in the way. Now we ask a different question: what actually empowers emotional regulation in the first place? What holds us steady when our own strength is not enough — which is always?

The answer is not another technique. It is an anchor.

Emotional regulation matures when we stop drawing our stability from ourselves and start drawing it from God — when our security, our identity, our acceptance, and our approval flow from Him rather than from our performance, our circumstances, or other people's opinions of us.

A person anchored in God can pause, can stay honest, can lay down a defense, because they are not scrambling to protect a self that feels at risk. The self is already secure. It is held.

Nobody in Scripture shows us this turn more clearly than Peter — because we get to watch him live on both sides of it.

Peter and His Own Sword

One of the most revealing moments in Scripture takes place on the night of Jesus' arrest.

The soldiers arrive carrying torches and weapons. The disciples are frightened and confused. In that moment, Peter does what many of us might have done. He reaches for his sword.

His actions were not motivated by hatred. They were motivated by love. Peter was fiercely loyal to Jesus. He believed he was protecting the One he had left everything to follow. With one swing of his sword, he struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

Then Jesus did something Peter never expected. He told Peter to put away the sword. And before anyone could react, Jesus reached down, touched the wounded man, and restored his ear.

Peter's heart was in the right place, but his method was not. His loyalty was genuine, yet his actions created a wound that Jesus immediately healed. And notice what Peter was operating from in that moment: his own strength. His own arm. His own sword. When he felt everything he loved slipping away, he reached for what he could do, and he swung.

This is worth sitting with, because it is the very thing we have been wrestling with for five weeks. Peter, in his own strength, sincere and loving and completely unable to regulate the storm inside him, reaches for a weapon and wounds a man. Self-effort under pressure does not produce peace. It produces a drawn sword.

The Night Peter's Strength Ran Out

The sword was not the end of Peter's night. It got worse, and it got worse in exactly the way self-strength always does — it ran out.

Only hours later, warming himself by a fire in the courtyard, the same bold Peter was asked three times whether he knew Jesus. And three times, this man who had sworn he would die for Christ, this man who had swung a sword at an armed crowd, denied that he even knew Him. A servant girl was enough to undo him.

How does the same man go from drawing a sword to denying Christ in one night? He does not. It is not two different men. It is one man running on one fuel — his own strength — and that fuel is enough for a brave gesture and not nearly enough for the long, frightening night. Peter's courage was real, but it was self-powered, and self-powered courage has a bottom. He hit it.

Most of us never draw a literal sword, and most of us are never questioned beside a fire. But we know this fuel.

It is the strength we run on when we grip the pause harder, try to think our way out of the lie, and hold our emotions together by sheer determination. It works for a while. Then a hard enough night comes, and we discover the bottom of ourselves — and we deny, or we explode, or we collapse. Not because we did not try. Because trying was never going to be enough.

Peter After the Resurrection

But Peter's story does not end at the fire.

After the resurrection, the risen Christ sought Peter out and restored him — three times asked, once for each denial, do you love me. And then, at Pentecost, something happened that changed the source Peter was running on. The Holy Spirit was poured out, and the same man who had denied Christ to a servant girl stood up in front of thousands and preached Him without flinching.

Look at the Peter of the book of Acts. Hauled before the very council that had condemned Jesus — the situation that had terrified him into denial — he now answers with steady boldness and will not stop speaking the name of Christ. Threatened, jailed, flogged, he keeps his peace and keeps going. The impulsive man who lived at the mercy of his own emotions has become steady, courageous, and self-controlled.

Here is the part that matters most for us. It is the same Peter. Same fierce loyalty, same bold personality, same man. His temperament did not get replaced. What changed was the source. Before, he drew on his own strength, and it failed him. Now he draws on the power of God through the Holy Spirit, and it holds. Peter did not white-knuckle his way into emotional maturity. He received it, through his partnership with the Father, in the power of the Spirit.

The man with the sword could not regulate himself for one night. The man filled with the Spirit regulated himself through imprisonment, opposition, and finally martyrdom. Same man. Different power source. That difference is the entire message of the second half of this study.

The Anchor: Where Regulation Actually Comes From

Scripture

“I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” —Philippians 4:13

“The Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.” —2 Timothy 1:7

“Apart from me you can do nothing.” —John 15:5

“And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit.” —Romans 8:11

Peter shows us in one life what is true for all of us. Emotional regulation is not finally a matter of technique or willpower. It is the fruit of a life anchored in God and empowered by His Spirit.

And here is the astonishing part. The very power that raised Jesus from the dead is the power that now lives in us. The steadiness Peter received at Pentecost was not a lesser strength for a lesser man — it was resurrection power, the same power that emptied the tomb, given to an ordinary, failing disciple. It is the same power offered to us.

Notice that last fruit of the Spirit Paul lists in Galatians — self-control. It sits at the end of a list that begins with love, joy, and peace, and it is called the fruit of the Spirit, not the fruit of trying hard.

Self-control is not something we manufacture by gritting our teeth. It grows in a life connected to God, the way fruit grows on a branch connected to the vine. Cut off from the vine, we get exactly what Peter got in his own strength — a drawn sword and a denial. Connected to it, we get what Peter got at Pentecost — power, steadiness, and peace under pressure.

And this is why the tools of the first five weeks were never the real engine. The pause, the plate, the HEART check, the RESET, the CATCH — they are good, and we will keep using them. But they work because they are plugged into something. A person whose security, identity, acceptance, and approval flow from God can pause, because they are not defending a fragile self. They can stay honest, because they are already accepted. They can lay a sword down, because they are already safe. The anchor is what makes the tools hold.

So the rest of this study turns from what we remove to what we receive. In the weeks ahead we will look at four places we have all tried to draw our stability from — and where God offers to become the true source instead. Our security flows from God, not from control. Our identity flows from God, not from our performance. Our acceptance flows from God, not from hiding what we are ashamed of. Our approval flows from God, not from the opinions of people. These are not techniques to master. They are anchors to rest in. And a soul anchored in them is a soul that can finally be steady.

Naming Your Own Sword

Peter's sword was literal. Ours usually are not. But every one of us has a way we reach for our own strength when we feel threatened — a place we grip harder instead of resting deeper.

Take some honest time this week and ask what your sword tends to be. For some of us it is control — when things feel shaky, we tighten our grip on everything we can manage. For others it is defending — we explain, justify, and correct the record. For others it is performing — we try to earn our way back to steady by doing more and doing it well. For others it is withdrawing — we pull back and handle it alone rather than let anyone see us struggle.

Write down the one that fits you most. Then ask the deeper question underneath it: what am I trying to secure by my own strength that God is offering to secure for me? Behind the sword is almost always a place we have not yet let our security, identity, acceptance, or approval flow from God.

Four Anchors to Come

This week is the turn. The weeks ahead will take the four anchors one at a time, and it may help to see the whole map now, so you know where we are going.

- Security flows from God — not from our control, our defending, or having the outcome in hand.
- Identity flows from God — not from our performance, our achievements, or our roles.
- Acceptance flows from God — not from hiding the things we are ashamed of, but from being fully known and reconciled.
- Approval flows from God — not from the opinions of people or the fear of their disappointment.

Four places we have all looked in the wrong direction for stability. Four places God offers to become the anchor instead.

Walking It Out This Week

Watch for the sword. This week, simply notice the moments you reach for your own strength — the grip tightening, the defense rising, the urge to perform or withdraw. You do not have to fix it yet. Just see it, the way Peter eventually saw his.

Name the fuel. When you catch yourself straining, pause and ask: am I running on my own strength right now, or on God's? Peter's whole story turns on that one question. Ours often does too.

Ask for the Spirit's help, out loud. The difference between the two Peters was the Holy Spirit. This week, when you feel your strength running low, stop striving long enough to actually ask — “Lord, I cannot hold this in my own strength; fill me and steady me.” Regulation empowered by God begins with admitting we cannot do it without Him.

One honest word before you go. Resting in God's strength is not the same as doing nothing, and it does not mean help from a doctor or counselor is a failure of faith. God often steadies us through the people and care He provides. If your emotions regularly overwhelm you no matter how you pray or rest, that is not weakness — it is worth talking to a doctor or counselor. Anchoring in God and seeking wise help are not opposites. They are often the same act of humility.

Closing Truth

For five weeks we worked to remove the barriers to emotional regulation, and that work was good. But Peter reminds us that removing barriers in our own strength will only carry us so far. The man with the sword could not last one night. The man filled with the Spirit could not be stopped.

The difference was never Peter's effort. It was his source. And that is the turn this study now takes — away from what we can manufacture, toward what only God can supply.

Emotional regulation is not finally something we achieve. It is something we receive, as our security, identity, acceptance, and approval come to rest in God, and His Spirit steadies what our strength never could.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for the story of Peter — for the honesty of a man who drew his sword and denied Your Son, and for the mercy that did not leave him there. Thank You that the same Peter who failed in his own strength was made steady by Your Spirit.

Show me my own sword. Show me the places where I am trying to hold my life together by my own effort, gripping and defending and performing until my strength runs out. Forgive me for the times I have tried to manufacture what only You can give.

Teach me to draw my security, my identity, my acceptance, and my approval from You. Anchor me, so that I am no longer scrambling to protect a self that feels at risk. And fill me with Your Spirit, so that the steadiness I could never produce becomes fruit that You grow in me.

When my strength runs out — and it will — remind me that this is not failure. It is the very place where Your power begins. In Jesus' name, amen.

Part Two

The Exchanges

Some of the most important changes in the Christian life begin when we loosen our grip on what we have tried to build for ourselves and receive what God has already given us.

We call these truths exchanges because each one invites us to release something fragile: the acceptance we tried to earn, the identity we pieced together, the security we attempted to create, and the approval we chased. In their place, God offers something that does not depend upon our performance and cannot be shaken by our circumstances.

We trade what we built for what God gives.

These four exchanges build upon one another. We will discover that we are already accepted, already known, already secure, and already approved—not because of anything we have accomplished, but because of what Christ has accomplished for us.

These truths are more than comforting ideas. They are anchors for the soul. As they move from something we understand into something we truly believe, they begin to steady our emotions, shape our choices, and change the way we live.

We no longer have to strive for what God has already given.

Come and receive what is already yours.

WEEK 7

The Great Exchange

Acceptance

Anchor: Acceptance flows from God — not from what we perform, prove, or hide.

Central truth: You were fully accepted before you ever did anything to earn it, and nothing you have done can undo it.

Truth line: *He took what we deserved and gave us what He deserved — and that exchange is already ours.*

We have come a long way together. For five weeks we worked at the barriers — the pause, the plate, the neglected needs, the old wounds, the rehearsed lies. Then, at the turning point, Peter showed us the hard truth underneath all of it: we cannot hold ourselves together by our own strength. His sword and his denial proved it.

So this week we come to rest. If the turn showed us we cannot do it in our own strength, this chapter shows us we were never meant to. Before we go on to talk about identity, approval, and everything else that flows from God, we have to start here — at acceptance — because acceptance is the ground everything else stands on.

And the first thing to understand about acceptance is that, for you, it is already settled. Not accepted-if. Not accepted-once-you-clean-up. Already. Fully. The rest of this week is simply helping you see how completely — so that you can finally stop striving for something you already have. And there may be no clearer picture of this in all of Scripture than a dying man who had nothing left to offer.

The Man Who Had Nothing Left to Offer

Three crosses stood on a hill outside Jerusalem. On the center cross hung the only innocent man who ever lived. On either side hung guilty men — both had broken the law, both deserved their punishment, and both were dying.

At first, one of those criminals joined the crowd in mocking Jesus. But something began to change in him. As he watched Jesus pray for the very men who nailed Him there, as he listened to Him refuse to answer hatred with hatred, something broke open.

He turned to the other thief and said, “We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he looked at Jesus and said the only thing he had left to say: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” (Luke 23:41–42)

It was not a polished prayer. There was no long confession, no promise to do better, no chance to make anything right. His hands were nailed to a cross and his life was nearly over. All he could do was turn toward Jesus and trust Him.

And Jesus answered, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

Think about what did not happen. Jesus did not ask him to prove himself. He did not tell him to earn another chance. He did not say, “if you somehow survive this, come and follow me.” He simply welcomed him. The thief arrived at the very end of his life with nothing left to offer except faith — and it was enough.

The Great Exchange

How could Jesus make a promise like that to a guilty, dying man? Because something far greater was taking place on the center cross.

The guilty man deserved judgment; Jesus did not. And yet Jesus willingly took the place where guilty people belong, so that guilty people could be welcomed into the place where He belongs. Scripture puts it in words worth reading slowly:

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

The thief deserved condemnation; Jesus received it. Jesus deserved perfect fellowship with the Father; the thief received it. That is the great exchange. He took what belonged to us and gave us what belonged to Him. The thief's acceptance was never earned. It was given. And the same is true for you. The account was settled on that cross, in your name, before you knew to ask.

Isaiah Saw This Day

Nearly seven hundred years before it happened, the prophet Isaiah described this day, and he was careful to name both halves of what we carry.

He wrote that Jesus “took up our pain and bore our suffering” — that is the wound done to us, the sorrow, the thing that was never our fault. And he wrote that “he was pierced for our transgressions... the punishment that brought us peace was on him” — that is the wrong done by us, the guilt, the thing we did carry. (Isaiah 53:4–5)

Standing beside Jesus, the thief brought both — a guilty past and a broken life — and Jesus carried all of it. Notice that this is the same for us. The person carrying a sin they committed and the person carrying a wound someone else inflicted are standing in the very same place, because Jesus bore all of it. Nothing the thief had done placed him beyond the reach of grace, and nothing you have done places you beyond it either. There is nothing you are holding that He did not already carry.

The Joy Set Before Him

Here is one of the most beautiful things about the good news — and it is the part I most want you to feel, not just understand.

From the outside, the cross looks like nothing but suffering, and it was suffering, real and terrible and undeserved. But Scripture tells us that from the inside, from Jesus' own vantage, there was something else entirely: "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame." (Hebrews 12:2)

Joy. There was joy set before Him. And the joy was us.

This is the wonder of the great exchange — that our value, our worth, brought Him such joy that He could look at that cross and see past it. He could look down through all the years ahead and envision us, coming at last into unity with the Father. This is the message of reconciliation: that God is no longer holding our sin against us, but has reconciled us to Himself through Christ. And that reconciliation was pure joy to Him.

It was our faces He saw. The faces of humanity, for all eternity, gathered home to the Father. That was the joy set before Him. That was His perspective, even there. He was not gritting His teeth through the cost of us. He was looking at our faces and counting it worth everything.

So when you feel you were not worthy or deserving of such a great gift, remember that God deemed you worth it, and values you above all else. When He created you, He looked at what He had made and called you very good — before you had done anything at all. You are not a debt He regrets. You are the joy He chose.

Nothing You Would Have to Fix First

So many of us live as though acceptance is conditional — as though there is some better version of ourselves we would have to become before we could really be received. The thief silences that lie for good.

He could not climb down from his cross. He could not repay the people he had wronged, could not rebuild his reputation, could not spend years demonstrating a changed life. He simply came to Jesus exactly as he was — and Jesus received him exactly where he was.

This is what Jesus meant when He said, “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away.” (John 6:37) Not whoever comes after they have everything together. Not whoever comes after they have finally conquered every struggle. Whoever comes. There is nothing you would have to fix first, because the fixing was His work, not yours, and it is finished.

Why This Brings Rest

Here is why this matters for a study on emotional regulation, and why acceptance had to come first.

So much of what dysregulates us is the exhausting work of trying to earn what God has already given. We perform so people will approve of us. We defend ourselves so no one thinks less of us. We hide the parts we hope no one sees. We live as though acceptance is always one mistake away from disappearing. It is the same striving Peter did with his sword, just quieter.

The thief had no performance left. No defense left. No place left to hide. All he had was Jesus — and Jesus was enough. When we finally believe that our acceptance has already been settled by Christ, something in us begins to rest. We stop scrambling to secure a place we already have, and the soul grows quiet. That is the anchor. Acceptance flows from God — already given, already ours.

Acceptance That Overflows

There is one more thing to see, because acceptance never stays still. When it is finally settled, something begins to flow out of us.

Years after the cross, another man met Jesus. Unlike the thief, Saul of Tarsus was not dying — he was hunting Christians, convinced he was serving God while persecuting the people who belonged to Christ. And then, on the road to Damascus, Jesus met him. The man who set out to arrest believers became one of the greatest servants Christ ever had. Not because he earned acceptance, but because he received it.

The thief and Paul could not have been more different. One had only hours left to live; the other had decades of ministry ahead. One could do nothing after receiving grace; the other spent the rest of his life pouring it out. One found peace at the very end of life; the other found purpose in the middle of it. And yet both began in exactly the same place — accepted by Christ. Everything else flowed from there.

That is the pattern for us, too. Remember why Jesus endured the cross — not from dread, but for the joy set before Him. The work God gives each of us to do was never meant to come from a place of dread, or from the exhausting effort to earn a love we do not yet feel we have. It flows out of the opposite place. It flows out of feeling loved, out of gratitude, out of peace.

When we are anchored in acceptance, we stop striving to earn it — and out of that settledness, we simply overflow. “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Matthew 12:34) A heart full of gratitude speaks gratitude. A heart resting in love pours out love. We do not manufacture the fruit of the Spirit by trying harder; it grows, the way we saw at the turn, out of a life connected to the Vine and settled in the Father's acceptance.

And this is how we become light. “Let your light shine before others.” (Matthew 5:16) Not by straining to be bright, not by performing goodness to prove we belong, but by being so anchored in acceptance that light simply pours out of us — the natural overflow of a heart that finally knows it is home. We are accepted, so we can rest. And because we rest, we overflow.

Part Two — Putting It to Work

This week is less about doing and more about receiving. The work, if we can even call it that, is to let the truth land — to move it from something you know in your head to something you rest in.

Stand beside the thief. Read Luke 23:39–43 slowly. Place yourself beside the dying man. Listen to his few words, and listen to the words of Jesus. Notice what Jesus required before He extended His promise — and notice that the answer is nothing at all.

Sit with the exchange. Read 2 Corinthians 5:21 slowly, more than once. He took what was yours. He gave you what was His. Let yourself sit in the sheer lopsidedness of it, and thank Him, without rushing to do anything about it.

Notice where you are still striving. As the week goes on, watch for the moments you catch yourself performing, defending, or hiding — trying to secure a place you already have. When you notice it, remember the thief. He had nothing left to offer, and Jesus welcomed him completely. Then gently remind yourself: this is already mine. I can stop reaching for it.

One honest word before you go. For some of us, being accepted is one of the hardest things to receive — not because we doubt God, but because somewhere along the way, acceptance came with conditions, or was offered and then withdrawn. If the idea of being fully accepted, no strings attached, feels almost impossible to trust, that is not a failure of faith. It is often a wound that needs gentle, patient care, sometimes with the help of a counselor or a trusted, safe person. Learning to receive love is real work, and God is patient with the process. He is not in a hurry, and He is not going anywhere.

Closing Truth

The thief arrived at the cross with nothing left to offer. Paul arrived on the Damascus road carrying a lifetime of opposition to Christ. Neither one earned acceptance. Both received it. And the same Savior who welcomed them welcomes you.

You did not earn your way to this table, and you cannot fall off of it. Everything else in this second half of our study flows from here — you can only draw your identity, your approval, and your security from God once you have rested in the truth that He has already accepted you, completely, right now, as you are.

So before we go any further, come and rest. You are not a stranger being evaluated at the door. In Christ, you are already home.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for receiving me through Jesus Christ. Thank You that my acceptance does not depend on what I have accomplished, what I have failed to do, or what I am still trying to overcome. Thank You that Jesus took what belonged to me and gave me what belonged to Him.

Where I have been striving to secure what is already mine — performing, defending, hiding — quiet me. Help me believe, all the way down, that there is nothing I would have to fix first, nothing too shameful to bring, nothing that could make You turn away.

Teach me to rest as a child rests in a home they know is theirs. And when it is hard to receive — when acceptance feels too good to trust — be patient with me, and heal the places that learned to expect otherwise. May my life overflow with gratitude, because my heart has finally found its home in You.

Thank You that I am already home. In Jesus' name, amen.

WEEK 8

Made on Purpose

Identity

Anchor: Identity flows from God — not from what we do, what was said over us, or what we have survived.

Central truth: Identity is not something you achieve. It is something you receive.

Truth line: *Before you ever accomplished anything, God decided you would bear His likeness.*

Earlier we came to rest. We saw that we are already accepted — welcomed by Christ the way the thief on the cross was welcomed, with nothing left to offer but faith. And we ended on the oldest truth of all: that when God created you, He looked at what He had made and called you very good, before you had done a single thing.

This week we stay right there, at that verse, because it answers the next question the heart always asks.

Most of us move through life carrying an unspoken question: who am I, really? We spend years trying to fit into molds, roles, and expectations handed to us by family, culture, comparison, or pain. We learn to measure ourselves by what we do, what we produce, or how well we perform. And somewhere along the way, we begin to assume that who we really are, underneath all the layers, is not quite enough.

But what if the deepest truth about you is not something you achieve, but something you receive? What if identity is not something you build, but something God already built into you?

The First Gift

In the opening pages of Scripture, before humanity took a breath, before there were commandments or cultures or even sin, God made a declaration about who we are. “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.” (Genesis 1:26) Identity was not an afterthought. It was not something added once humanity matured or proved itself. It was the very first gift God placed over us.

You were created as a reflection of God — not accidentally, not partially, and not conditionally. Before you ever accomplished anything, God decided you would bear His likeness. Your story does not begin with your beginning. It begins with God's desire.

This is the part most people never fully embrace. We are so accustomed to defining ourselves by what we do, what we struggle with, what we have survived, or what others have said about us, that we forget the first and truest thing about us: we were made in the image of God. And so identity is not something we achieve. It is something we receive. We don't create it; we uncover it. We don't manufacture it; we learn to accept what God has already said.

And the image of God is not just reflected in the “spiritual” parts of your life. It shows up in your curiosity, your creativity, your compassion, your logic, your humor, your strength, your sensitivity, your ability to love, and your longing for purpose. Even the parts of you that others misunderstood or minimized may actually be some of the clearest evidence of God's craftsmanship. You are more like Him than you realize.

Known Before You Were Born

If the first truth about you is that you were made in God's image, the second is just as staggering: you were known before anyone else knew you. Before you had a name, before your personality took shape, before anyone imagined who you might become, God already knew you. Not in a distant, general sense, but in a personal, intimate way.

Most of us assume our story started when we were born, when our families first held us, when the world first began noticing us. But Scripture says it started long before that. When God spoke to Jeremiah, He was revealing something true about every human being He creates: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.” (Jeremiah 1:5) And the psalmist says it too: “You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb... I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” (Psalm 139:13–14)

Sit with that for a moment. God knew you — before your personality, before your choices, before your mistakes, before your fears, before your strengths. You were known before you were formed.

Jeremiah did not know what to do with that. His first reaction was to point out everything he was not: I don't know how to speak, I'm too young. He looked at his inadequacies and assumed God must have overlooked them. But God was not surprised, and He was not second-guessing. He knew exactly who Jeremiah was, and exactly who he would become. Maybe you have had similar thoughts — surely God couldn't use someone like me, maybe who I am isn't enough. But that is just it. God does know you, and He still chose you. He still formed you. He still set you apart with purpose woven into the very beginning of your being.

And here is a part that might surprise you. The things you have carried since childhood — the sensitivities, the longings, the instincts, the things that make your heart light up or break — those are not random. They did not come from nowhere. Maybe you have always felt deeply. Maybe you have always been drawn to beauty, or justice, or creativity. Maybe you have always noticed the people on the edges, or asked deeper questions than everyone around you. Those are not just personality quirks. They are early signs of your design — clues that you were known, clues that God planted something in you before you ever took your first breath. You did not stumble into who you are. You were shaped that way.

The First Battle Was an Identity Battle

If identity is that settled, why does knowing who we are feel so fragile, so easily shaken?

Because the very first spiritual battle in history was an identity battle. Notice where the enemy began. He did not start by attacking Adam and Eve's morality or their productivity. He attacked their trust in God, and through it, their understanding of themselves. “Did God really say...?” was not a question about a piece of fruit. It was a question designed to fracture identity.

This is the enemy's oldest strategy, and he still uses it. If he can distort how you see God, he will distort how you see yourself. Every lie about God leads to a lie about you. The voice that says God is harsh, or distant, or disappointed, is the same voice that will soon be telling you that you are not enough, not lovable, not worth much — and it will do it in your own inner voice, so that you never notice it is not yours.

But God never wavered from His first declaration. The fall damaged our sense of identity, but it did not erase the truth. In many ways, the whole rest of Scripture is God's long, patient story of restoring people to the truth of who they already were in His heart.

Called Good Before You Were Broken

When God finished creating, He looked at everything He had made, including humanity, and said it was “very good.” (Genesis 1:31) Not “barely acceptable.” Not “almost there.” Not “promising, if you work harder.” Good. That was God's very first posture toward you — delight, affirmation, and blessing, before you had done anything to earn it or anything to lose it.

It is hard for many of us to believe that. Somewhere along the way, the purity of God's original blessing got buried under a mountain of other messages: not thin enough, not smart enough, not spiritual enough, not strong enough, not lovable enough. And without realizing it, we begin to live from a place of deep insecurity, as though God's first word over humanity had been a criticism instead of a blessing.

Those messages calcify over time into identity statements — “I’m broken,” “I’m a failure,” “I’ll never be enough,” “something is wrong with me.” But when God looked at humanity, His first response was joy. His first words were blessing. His first posture was delight. Shame whispers, “it can’t be good.” God whispers, “it already is.”

You were blessed before you were broken. And no amount of brokenness can erase the original design of God’s goodness in you.

Called Through Your Weakness

There is one more lie the enemy loves to use against our identity, and it is quieter than the others. It is the belief that our weaknesses disqualify us — that who we really are, underneath, is not quite enough for God to use.

Most of us are far more aware of what we cannot do than what we can. We can list our flaws without hesitation. And the moment we sense that God might want to use us, those weaknesses rush to the front of the mind like an army shouting, “not you, not with this, not with who you are.”

If that sounds familiar, you are in good company. Moses felt exactly the same way. When God called him from the burning bush, he did not respond with confidence. He argued. He listed every reason God had chosen the wrong person: I’m not a good speaker, what if they don’t believe me, I’m not the right person. But God did not back off, and He did not apologize for calling him. He met every insecurity Moses had — not by removing the weakness, but by promising His presence. “I will be with you.” (Exodus 3:12)

Because here is something important: God does not call you because of your strengths. He calls you because of His purpose. We assume God works best through our impressive parts — our talents, our polished areas, our confidence. But Scripture tells a different story. Again and again, God chooses to work through the places that feel most fragile, because weakness keeps us dependent and humble, aware that whatever He does through us is not because of our perfection but because of His grace. Weakness becomes the soil where God’s strength can actually take root.

So maybe the things you see as weaknesses are not barriers to God’s plan. Maybe they are invitations. Maybe the insecurity you are ashamed of is the very thing God wants to redeem. Maybe the limitation you obsess over is exactly the place He plans to show His strength. God did not choose Moses in spite of his weakness — He chose him with full awareness of it. And He chooses you the same way. You do not need every insecurity solved before God can use you. God never asked Moses to be impressive. He only asked him to be willing — and He is asking the same from you.

Why This Steadies Everything

Here is why this matters for a study on emotional regulation.

So much of what unsettles us emotionally is identity under threat. Criticism can level us when our sense of who we are rides on being competent. Failure can crush us when we have quietly decided that we are our performance. A single harsh word can undo a whole day when our identity is built on other people's approval. In each case, the thing being attacked is the very thing we are standing on — so when it shakes, we shake.

But a person whose identity is anchored in God can feel the sting of criticism without being destroyed by it, because the thing being criticized is not the thing holding them up. You can fail at something without being a failure. You can be misjudged without becoming the label. You can lose a role, a title, or an ability — and still be exactly who God said you are, because that was never the source of your identity in the first place.

Identity is the soil in which every other part of your life grows. When it is distorted, everything else gets distorted with it — purpose, calling, relationships, even our ability to hear God. But when identity is anchored where it belongs, clarity returns. Confidence returns. Peace becomes possible. A settled sense of who you are is one of the steadiest anchors an emotional life can have.

Part Two — Putting It to Work

Like last week, this is less about doing and more about receiving — learning to accept what God has already said about you.

Return to the first words. Read Genesis 1:26–31 slowly this week. These are the very first words God ever spoke over humanity, and they are spoken over you. Let them wash over the labeling, comparison, and insecurity that have attached themselves to your story over the years.

Name the voice. This week, when a harsh identity statement runs through your mind — I'm a failure, I'm not enough, something is wrong with me — pause and ask where that voice began. It is the old “Did God really say...?” in a new outfit. You do not have to argue with it. Just notice that it is not God's voice, and gently return to what He actually said: very good.

Receive one thing you overlook. God sees the strengths you dismiss, the qualities you minimize, the good you fail to notice in yourself — and He calls them good. Name one part of yourself you tend to overlook or criticize, and this week, practice thanking God for it as part of how He made you.

One honest word before you go. For some of us, the messages that fractured our identity did not come from a vague “culture.” They came from specific people, sometimes people who should have been safe, and they went deep. If believing you are “very good” feels not just difficult but impossible, that is not a lack of

faith. Deep identity wounds often need patient, skilled help to heal, and there is no shame in walking that road with a counselor or trusted, safe person alongside you. God is not in a hurry with you.

Closing Truth

You are not simply the sum of your experiences or the product of your environment. You are not defined by what was said to you in childhood, nor by the failures you carry, nor by the labels others placed on you. You were formed with intention, crafted with precision, and given dignity before you ever entered this world.

Identity is not something you achieve. It is something you receive. And because God does not make junk, there is nothing insignificant, defective, or forgotten about your design.

You are an image-bearer of the living God. You were made on purpose, with purpose, for purpose. Let that truth settle into the places where lies have lived for far too long.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You that my identity was Your gift before it was ever my struggle. Thank You that before I accomplished anything, You decided I would bear Your likeness, and that when You made me, You called me very good.

Forgive me for the times I have handed the naming of myself over to other voices — to comparison, to criticism, to old wounds, to my own harsh inner dialogue. Help me hear again the very first words You spoke, and to believe them all the way down.

Where lies have lived in me for too long, speak Your truth into those places. Anchor me so deeply in who You say I am that criticism cannot level me and failure cannot define me. Let me live as an image-bearer, settled and steady, made on purpose by a God who does not make junk. In Jesus' name, amen.

Go Deeper

This week only opens the door on identity. If it stirred something you want to explore further, the theme is developed in full in Dr. Cindy H. Carr's book *God Made You and He Does Not Make Junk*, which walks through the Design Discovery Journey — a step-by-step process of uncovering how God formed you, across five movements: Design (who God made you), Desire (what He writes on your heart), Drive (your inner motivational wiring), Gifts (how the Spirit works through you), and Grace (the unique way your life expresses God to the world). It is available through CHC Connect at cindyhcarr.com.

WEEK 9

Asleep in the Storm

Security

Anchor: Security flows from God — not from control, circumstances, or having the outcome in hand.

Central truth: Our security is anchored in our acceptance and identity in Christ, which cannot be shaken, rather than in circumstances, which can.

Truth line: *An anchor does not stop the storm. It holds you steady in it, because it is fastened to something that is not moving.*

Asleep in the Storm

A storm came up suddenly on the Sea of Galilee, the kind of storm that terrified even seasoned fishermen. The waves broke over the boat until it was nearly swamped. The disciples, some of whom had spent their whole lives on that water, were certain they were about to die.

And Jesus was asleep.

Not pretending. Not gritting through it. Asleep, on a cushion, in the stern of a boat that was filling with water. The disciples finally woke Him, frightened and a little indignant: “Teacher, don't you care if we drown?” He got up, spoke to the wind and the waves, and the storm went still. Then He turned to them and asked, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” (Mark 4:38–40)

Sit with the picture for a moment. The same storm was raging around all of them. The same waves, the same wind, the same boat. But inside that boat were two completely different internal worlds. The disciples were panicked. Jesus was at peace, so at peace He could sleep.

The difference was not the storm. The difference was where their security was anchored. The disciples' security was tied to the circumstances — to a calm sea, a dry boat, a manageable situation — and when the circumstances shook, they came apart. Jesus' security was anchored somewhere the storm could not reach: in His unshakable relationship with the Father. The storm could rage all around Him, but inside, He had enough peace to rest in the middle of it.

A Need We Were Built With

Before we go further, it helps to say something plainly, because many of us carry quiet shame about it. The need to feel secure and safe is not a weakness, and it is

not a lack of faith. God built it into us. From the moment we are born, we are wired to look for a safe place, a steady presence, solid ground under our feet. That longing for security is part of the design, not a flaw in it.

So the question this week is never whether you should need security. You will. You were made to. The only question is where you are getting it — and whether that place can actually hold.

The Sand We Build On

Most of us try to build our security on things that feel solid but cannot bear the weight. We look for it in control — if I can just manage every detail, plan for every outcome, keep my hand on everything, then I will be safe. We look for it in circumstances — in a steady income, good health, a predictable schedule, people behaving the way we need them to. We look for it in our ability to see what is coming and get out ahead of it.

None of these things are wrong to have. But none of them can be your anchor, because every one of them can change overnight. The income can disappear. The diagnosis can come. The person can leave. The plan can fall apart in an afternoon. When our security is fastened to things that move, we live braced, always scanning the horizon for the next threat, never quite able to rest — because somewhere underneath, we know the ground could shift at any moment. That is not a character flaw. It is what happens when an anchor is set in sand.

This is the same grasping we saw in Peter. When everything he loved seemed about to be taken, he reached for his sword — a desperate grab at control, at securing an outcome that was never his to secure. Self-effort under threat always reaches for the sword. It is trying to manufacture a safety that only God can give.

The Anchor That Holds

Scripture gives us a better place to set the anchor. “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” (Hebrews 6:19) Notice what an anchor actually does. It does not stop the storm. It does not calm the sea or change the weather. It holds you steady in the storm, because it is fastened to something that is not moving.

And here is what makes this anchor unshakable, and why these past weeks had to come first. Your security is not anchored in your circumstances. It is anchored in your acceptance and your identity in Christ — the very things we have been building on.

Remember what we have already learned. You are already accepted, welcomed by Christ with nothing left to prove, at a table you did not earn and cannot fall from. And you are already His, made in His image, named by God before you had done anything at all. Those two things are the deepest truths about you — and they are the two things a storm cannot touch. Your bank account can change. Your health can change. The people and plans around you can change. But your acceptance in

Christ does not change, and your identity as God's own does not change. That is why they make such a solid anchor. They are fastened to the one thing in the universe that does not move: God Himself, and His unchanging love for you.

Circumstances are the weather. Your standing in Christ is the ground. When the deepest thing about you — I am accepted, I am His — cannot be shaken, then the storms, real as they are, lose their power to shake you at the core.

A Man Who Built on Sand

If Jesus shows us what it looks like to have the anchor set right from the start, there is another man in Scripture who shows us the harder and more hopeful thing: what it looks like to have it set wrong, lose everything, and have it set right again.

Before he was the apostle Paul, he was Saul of Tarsus, and by every human measure he was secure. He had the finest education, trained under the most respected teacher of his day. He had religious pedigree, standing in his community, and a certainty about his own rightness that few could match. He was somebody. His security was built on his credentials, his knowledge, and his place among his people. He was so secure in all of it that he set out to destroy the followers of Jesus, convinced he was doing the work of God.

Then, on the road to Damascus, Jesus interrupted him, and it wrecked his entire world. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4) In an instant, the somebody became a nobody. Struck blind, he had to be led into the city by the hand like a child. The believers were afraid of him and would not accept him. The credentials that had been his whole security were suddenly worthless — he could not get in on his own word. He needed Barnabas to vouch for him before the apostles would even receive him. Everything he had built his life on had been stripped away.

And here is what Paul discovered in the wreckage: all of it had been shifting sand. The education, the standing, the self-made certainty — none of it could hold the weight of a life. Years later he would write about those very credentials: “Whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ... I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.” (Philippians 3:7–8) He did not just set his old security aside. He counted it loss — because he had finally found the one foundation that holds. His security was no longer in his own strength, his own knowledge, or his own community. It was in walking in partnership with the Father, through Jesus Christ. That, and that alone, was solid ground.

The Anchor Holds Through the Storm

Here is what makes Paul's story so honest, and so freeing. When his security was re-anchored in Christ, God did not hand him back an easy, protected life. Just the opposite.

The rest of Paul's life was one storm after another. He was beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked, hungry, hunted, and finally executed. If security in God meant calm circumstances, Paul's life would have disproven the whole idea. But that is exactly the point. His anchor did not stop the storms. It held him steady through every one of them.

This is the deeper comfort of this anchor, and we must not miss it. God does not always calm the storm. Sometimes He keeps us through it. Paul learned to say, from inside a prison cell, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." (Philippians 4:11) And when he begged God to remove a painful thorn, the answer was not relief but presence: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

That is why we do not have to fear the storm to have peace in it. Our anchor was never a promise that the sea would stay calm. It is the promise that the One who holds us will never let go. The disciples in that boat were not alone in the storm — Jesus was in the boat with them. And that is the truest thing about your storms, too. You are not weathering them alone. The God who is unchanging, who does not move, has also promised the thing that matters most when the waves are high:

"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5) An unmoving God, present with you, holding you fast — that is an anchor no storm can break.

Why This Steadies Everything

Here is why this matters so directly for a study on emotional regulation.

Almost all fear and anxiety is security under threat. When we feel afraid, at bottom we are feeling unsafe — sensing that something we depend on for our security might be taken. That is why anxiety and a shaking circumstance so often arrive together. If our security is fastened to the circumstance, then every threat to the circumstance is a threat to us, and the fear floods in.

But when our security is anchored in what cannot be shaken, something changes in how we meet the storm. The storm is still a storm. The fear may still rise. But it no longer reaches all the way down, because the deepest part of us is fastened to solid ground. Like Jesus in the boat, we can face the very same waves that panic others and find that, underneath the fear, there is a place in us that is still at rest. Not because we stopped the storm, but because our anchor was never set in the storm to begin with.

Part Two — Putting It to Work

This week, we practice noticing where our anchor is set, and gently re-fastening it to what cannot be shaken.

Name your storm. What is the circumstance you are most afraid will shake — the health concern, the finances, the relationship, the thing you keep trying to control? Name it honestly. You are not being faithless by admitting you are afraid. You are locating where your anchor has drifted.

Ask where the security is fastened. For that fear, ask: what am I depending on to feel safe here? Usually it is a circumstance — something staying the way I need it to stay. Notice that, without shame. Then gently remind yourself of the two things that cannot be taken: I am accepted in Christ, and I am His. Those do not depend on this storm's outcome.

Picture the boat. When the fear rises this week, picture Jesus asleep in the stern while the waves break over the boat. Let that image preach to you. The peace to rest in a storm does not come from a calm sea. It comes from an anchor the sea cannot reach. Ask Him for that same rest.

One honest word before you go. For some of us, the loss of security was not hypothetical. Safety was taken, sometimes early, sometimes by people who should have provided it, and the body learned to stay braced for the next threat. If your sense of being unsafe runs deeper than a passing worry — if it lives in your body, if calm feels dangerous, if you cannot remember feeling truly safe — that is not a lack of faith, and it is not something to simply pray harder about. It is a wound, and wounds like that often heal best with the help of a skilled counselor alongside the steady presence of God. Learning to feel safe again is holy work, and you do not have to do it alone.

Closing Truth

The disciples and Jesus were in the very same storm. The difference was never the weather. It was where their security was anchored.

You were built with a real need to feel safe, and God does not shame that need. He simply offers you a better place to fasten it than the shifting sand of circumstance. Your acceptance in Christ and your identity as His child are the two things the storm cannot reach — and they are anchor enough to let you rest, even while the waves are still breaking.

An anchor does not stop the storm. It holds you steady in it, because it is fastened to something that is not moving. And nothing in all creation is more unmoving than the God who has already accepted you and already called you His own.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You that I was made with a need to feel safe, and that You do not scold me for it. Thank You that You offer Yourself as the anchor my soul was always looking for.

Show me where I have fastened my security to things that move — to control, to circumstances, to my own ability to manage what is coming. Forgive me for reaching for the sword when I was afraid, trying to secure by my own strength a safety that only You can give.

Anchor me in what cannot be shaken: that I am accepted in Christ, and that I am Yours. When the storms come, and they will, let me find what Jesus found in that boat — a peace deep enough to rest in, not because the waves have stopped, but because my anchor holds. In Jesus' name, amen.

WEEK 10

What Are You Doing, and How Can I Help?

Approval

Anchor: Approval flows from God — not from the praise, applause, or acceptance of people.

Central truth: We are already fully approved as God's children. From that settled place, we get the honor of joining His work — and living for one verdict: His “well done.”

Truth line: *God did not keep the work of reconciliation to Himself. He entrusted it to us.*

Loved Before the Work Began

Before Jesus preached a single sermon, healed a single person, or performed a single miracle, the Father spoke over Him at His baptism: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17)

Notice the timing. The Father declared His delight and approval before Jesus had done any of the work. The approval came first, and the ministry flowed out of it. Jesus did not go to work in order to earn the Father's love. He went to work because He already had it.

This is where we have to begin, because everything in this final anchor depends on it. We have spent these weeks learning that you are already accepted, already known, already secure — loved and approved as God's own child before you have done anything at all. That is settled. This week is not about earning God's approval of you as a person. You already have it, completely and forever. This week is about something that grows out of that settled love: the honor of getting to join Him in His work.

The Bottomless Bucket

But there is a counterfeit approval that competes for our hearts, and most of us have chased it. It is the approval of people. We perform so others will be impressed. We shape ourselves to be liked. We are lifted up by praise and leveled by criticism, and either way we are owned by what people think of us. It is exhausting, and it never ends, because human approval is a bottomless bucket. You can never pour in enough to feel full. The applause fades by morning. The crowd that praises you today can turn tomorrow. And while we are busy performing for people, we grow deaf to the one voice that actually matters.

Scripture names this plainly. Israel's first king, Saul, lost his kingdom over exactly this. When confronted with his disobedience, his confession revealed the root of it: "I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them." (1 Samuel 15:24) The fear of people had become louder than the voice of God. And Paul draws the line just as sharply: "Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? ... If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ." (Galatians 1:10) You cannot serve two verdicts. One of them has to become quieter.

A Wild and Wonderful Truth

Here is where this anchor turns from warning into wonder — and it may be one of the most staggering truths in all of Scripture.

God has assigned us work to do. He did not save us and then set us on a shelf. Reconciliation was the free gift, received with empty hands like the thief on the cross. But having reconciled us to Himself, God then did something almost unthinkable: He placed the message of that reconciliation into human hands.

Listen to how Paul says it: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." (2 Corinthians 5:20) An ambassador represents the King. God, who needs nothing and no one, chose not to keep the work of reconciliation to Himself. He willingly shared it. He made Himself, in a sense, a partner with humanity — entrusting to ordinary people the most important message in the world, and choosing to make His appeal to the world through us.

Sit with the weight of that. The God of the universe does not complete His work on earth without the cooperation of His children. He could have done it any other way. He chose this way — to work through us, to hand us the honor and the privilege and the responsibility of walking as His representatives on the earth. That is not a burden laid on you. It is a dignity handed to you.

Different Hands, One Work

And He does not ask everyone to carry it the same way. He gave different gifts to different people, on purpose.

"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace... If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides." (1 Peter 4:10–11) Some are given speaking gifts. Some are given serving gifts. Some lead, some encourage, some give, some show mercy. There are no unassigned children and no insignificant assignments. The very design we have been uncovering these weeks — who God made you to be — is not just for your comfort. It is the shape of your commission. You were formed a particular way so that you could carry a particular part of His work that no one else can carry in quite the same way.

Well Done

So whose approval do we live for? We live for the approval of the One who already loves us. “Well done, good and faithful servant... come and share your master's happiness!” (Matthew 25:23) Those are the words the heart was made to hear. Not the applause of a crowd that forgets your name by morning, but the “well done” of the Father who knew your name before you were born.

And this is the approval Jesus Himself lived for. At the end of His life, preparing to return to the Father, He prayed, “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.” (John 17:4) That is a life with nothing left undone that mattered — not because He did every possible thing, but because He faithfully did the thing the Father gave Him. That is the “well done” available to every one of us: not a flawless performance, but a faithful stewardship of the assignment and the gifts we were given.

Because here is the truth we can finally rest in: “The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him.” (Psalm 37:23) The righteous do not have to manufacture their path or perform for a crowd. Their steps are ordered by God Himself. Our job is simply to walk them, faithfully, in the strength He provides.

The Daily Question

So how do we live this out, practically, day by day? It comes down to one beautifully simple question.

Most of us begin the day with our own agenda and ask God to bless it. What if we flipped it? What if we began each morning by turning to Him and asking: God, what are You doing today, and how can I help?

That single question rearranges everything. It takes us out of the exhausting business of performing — for people, or even for God to earn what we already have — and puts us into the joyful business of partnering. It assumes He is already at work, which He is. It assumes we have a part to play, which we do. And it frees us from the pressure of building our own kingdom, because we are simply joining His. God, what are You doing today, and how can I help? A child who begins the day that way is a child who will hear “well done” at the end of it.

Why This Steadies Everything

Here is why this is the anchor that steadies our emotions in public, where the others are tested.

When our sense of worth rides on people's approval, we live on a roller coaster — inflated by praise, crushed by criticism, anxious before every performance, deflated after it. Our emotional state is handed over to the last person who had an opinion about us. But when the Father's approval is the one that matters, and we know it is already ours, the crowd loses its grip. We can receive an honest criticism without being destroyed by it, because it is not the verdict that defines

us. We can receive genuine praise without being inflated by it, because it is not the approval we were living for. We become free — free to love people deeply without needing them, free to serve without keeping score, free to do the work in front of us without checking over our shoulder to see who is watching.

This is not indifference to people. Jesus was never aloof; He was moved with compassion, He wept, He loved deeply. Being freed from the fear of people does not make us care less about them. It frees us to love them more purely, because we are no longer using them to fill a bucket only God can fill.

Part Two — Putting It to Work

This week, we practice trading the approval of the crowd for the approval of the Father — and stepping into the assignment with joy.

Ask the daily question. Each morning this week, before your own to-do list, pause and ask: God, what are You doing today, and how can I help? Then watch for the answer as the day unfolds — a person to encourage, a need to meet, a word to speak, a quiet act of service. You are not generating the work. You are joining it.

Name your bucket. Where do you most chase people's approval — at work, at home, online, at church? Whose opinion of you holds too much power? Name it honestly, and then remind yourself: I already have the only approval I truly need. I can let that verdict go quiet.

Own your assignment. Think about the gifts God has placed in you — the way He made you, the things you do that serve others well. That is not an accident, and it is not just for you. It is your part of His work. Name one way, this week, you can use it on purpose as His ambassador.

One honest word before you go. For some of us, the pull toward people's approval is not a bad habit but a deep survival wiring, learned in homes or seasons where love truly was conditional and approval had to be earned to stay safe. If the fear of disappointing people grips you so tightly that it drives your choices and steals your peace, that is not a character weakness, and “try harder to care less” will not fix it. That kind of pattern often heals with the help of a skilled counselor alongside the steady love of God. Learning to live for an audience of One is freedom worth pursuing, and there is no shame in getting help to walk into it.

Closing Truth

You were loved and approved before you did anything, and nothing you do can add to it or take from it. That question is settled. And out of that settled love, God has handed you an astonishing honor: to be His ambassador on the earth, to carry the message of reconciliation you yourself received, to join Him in the very work He is doing in the world.

So we let the crowd go quiet, and we live for one voice. We stop performing and start partnering. We wake each morning and ask, God, what are You doing today, and how can I help? And we spend our lives leaning toward the only approval that will ever satisfy the human heart.

“Well done, good and faithful servant.” There is no applause on earth worth trading for those words.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You that You loved me and approved me before I ever did a thing for You, and that Your delight in me does not rise and fall with my performance. Thank You that I do not have to earn what You have already freely given.

Forgive me for the times I have lived for the approval of people — performing, pleasing, fearing their opinions more than I trusted Yours. Quiet that crowd in me, and tune my ear to Your voice alone.

Thank You for the staggering honor of being Your ambassador, for entrusting the message of reconciliation to hands like mine. Show me the work You are doing, and make me quick to say yes. Let me begin each day asking what You are doing and how I can help, and let me live, more and more, for the only words that will ever be enough: well done, good and faithful servant. In Jesus' name, amen.

Bringing It Together

We have covered a great deal of ground. We named the barriers and learned how to clear them. We turned from relying on our own strength to depending on His. And we received the unshakable truths that steady everything else.

Now we slow down.

These final two weeks are not about mastering something new. They are about allowing everything we have learned to settle more deeply within us. First, we will step back and look at the journey as a whole—to recognize what God has been doing and honestly consider where we are now. Then we will gather, because some things are best experienced not alone, but in the company of people we love and trust.

This is where what we have learned begins to become a way of life.

Come and see what God has done—and then let us carry it forward together.

WEEK 11

The Whole Picture

Seeing the Whole Journey

This week: We step back and see the whole journey at once — everything we cleared away, and everything we received — and discover what it was all for.

Central truth: For ten weeks we have been doing one thing: removing what is false and receiving what is true, so that you can simply be who God created you to be.

Truth line: *The goal was never only to manage your emotions. It was to set you free to be.*

For ten weeks we have been on a journey together, and this week we stop climbing long enough to look back at the whole trail. Take a breath here. Before you is a lot of ground, and you have covered every step of it.

At first glance the weeks may seem like ten separate lessons — a pause here, a plate there, a storm, a cross. But they were never really separate. From the very beginning, all of it was moving toward one thing. This week we are going to see what that one thing was. And it may surprise you.

Part One — The Barriers We Removed

The first half of our journey was about clearing the path. Emotional regulation, we learned, is often blocked by very real barriers — things that get in the way of responding instead of reacting. So one by one, we learned to remove them.

Week 1 · The Pause — We learned that emotions make excellent servants but poor masters, and we found the space between what we feel and what we do — the pause where wisdom gets a word in before we react.

Week 2 · The Overloaded Plate — We learned to SIFT the plate — to see what we carry, sort what God handed us from what we picked up on our own, and set down the weight that was never ours, so there was room to respond with grace.

Week 3 · The HEART Check — We discovered how often what looks like an emotional problem is really a neglected need — hungry, exhausted, angry, disconnected, or distant from God — and we learned to check the need beneath the feeling.

Week 4 · RESET — We learned to recognize when an old wound is bleeding into a present moment, so we could respond to what is actually in front of us instead of to something long past.

Week 5 · CATCH — We learned to catch the lies we rehearse — the familiar sentences we repeat until they begin to feel like facts — and to test them against the truth of God's Word.

Five barriers. Five ways we cleared the path. It was good and necessary work — but if you remember, by the end of it we had bumped into something we could not fix by trying harder.

The Turn (Week 6)

In Week 6 we came to the honest truth underneath all of it. We watched Peter reach for his sword in his own strength, and then deny his Lord before the night was over — the same man, undone, because self-effort has a bottom and he hit it. And we realized we had been bumping into that same bottom in ourselves. The tools were good, but our own strength was never going to be enough to hold them.

So we turned a corner. We stopped asking only what barriers to remove, and began asking what could actually empower us — what could hold us steady when our own strength ran out. And the answer was not another technique. It was an anchor. From that point on, everything changed. We stopped working to remove things, and started learning to receive them.

Part Two — The Exchanges We Received

The second half of our journey was about receiving. Instead of clearing away what was false, we began accepting what was already true — the unshakable things that flow to us from God. We called them the anchors, and each one is a kind of exchange: we hand over something fragile, and God gives us something that cannot be taken.

Week 7 · Acceptance — We received the great exchange — Jesus taking what we deserved and giving us what He deserved. We traded our striving to be accepted for the truth that we already are, welcomed with nothing left to prove, at a table we did not earn and cannot fall from.

Week 8 · Identity — We received who we are. We traded the identity we cobbled together from what we do and what was said over us for the one God gave us before we had done anything at all: made in His image, known before birth, called very good.

Week 9 · Security — We received a place to stand. We traded the shifting sand of control and circumstance for an anchor the storm cannot reach — our acceptance and identity in Christ — and found, like Jesus asleep in the boat, a peace that holds even when the waves do not stop.

Week 10 · Approval — We received the only verdict that matters. We traded the bottomless bucket of people's approval for the Father's 'well done,' and discovered the honor of being His ambassadors — freed to love people without needing them, and to join Him in His work.

Four anchors. Four exchanges. Four fragile things handed over, and four unshakable things received in their place.

The Whole Picture

Now step back and look at the entire journey at once, and see if you notice what was happening all along.

Every single week did one of two things. In the first half, each week removed a barrier — something false or heavy or in the way, lifted off of you. In the second half, each week gave you an exchange — something true and unshakable, received in return. Remove a barrier. Receive an exchange. That is the whole map. That is what we have been doing for ten weeks.

Barriers and Exchanges.

Barriers and Exchanges. Or simply — BE.

And that word is not an accident, because it turns out to be the whole point. All this time, the goal was never only to help you manage your emotions. Managing emotions was never the destination. It was the doorway. Behind every barrier we removed and every exchange we received was one quiet purpose, working the entire time: to clear away everything false that was pressed down on you, and to hand you everything true that is already yours — so that you could finally, freely, simply be.

Be present, instead of hijacked by the moment. Be at peace, instead of braced against the storm. Be renewed in your mind, instead of ruled by the lies you rehearsed. Be secure, accepted, and unafraid. Be the person God saw when He called you very good, before you had done a single thing to earn it.

For ten weeks, we have worked hard for one beautiful reason: so that you can simply be who God created you to be.

Part Three — Taking Honest Inventory

This is not a test, and it is not a place to grade yourself. It is simply an honest inventory — a chance to notice where you are on the journey, so you know how to keep walking it. Take your time with these four questions, and be gentle with your answers.

What did I learn? Look back over the ten weeks. Which truth or tool landed most deeply for you — the one you know you will carry? Name it. It is yours now.

What still needs practice? Which of these is still more of an idea in your head than a habit in your life? There is no shame here. Naming what needs practice is not failure; it is simply knowing where to keep working.

What feels too big to handle alone? Was there a week that touched something deeper than a tool could reach — an old wound, a shame, a fear that will not lift? If so, that is worth honoring, not hiding. And it deserves a real next step: naming one safe person, counselor, or pastor you could actually reach out to this month. Write the name down. Some things heal best when we let someone help us carry them.

What can I now give someone else? You did not receive all of this only for yourself. Which of these truths or tools are you now able to hand to someone in your life who needs it? Part of being God's ambassador is passing on what you have received. Name one person, and one thing you could give them.

Closing Truth

Ten weeks. Five barriers removed, four exchanges received, and one turn in the middle where you stopped striving and started resting. It has been real work, and you have done it.

But the work was never the point. The freedom on the other side of it was. You were never a project to be fixed. You were a person to be freed — freed from what was false, and freed into what was always true of you.

So as we come to the end of this journey and prepare to gather together, hear the one thing it was all for. God has been clearing the ground and building the anchor so that you can stop striving, stop performing, stop bracing, and simply be who He created you to be. That is the whole picture. That has been the goal all along.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for every step of this journey. Thank You for the barriers You helped me remove and the truths You helped me receive. Thank You that behind all of it, You were doing something I could not see — clearing away the false and handing me the true.

Thank You that You never wanted only to manage me, but to free me. Thank You that I do not have to earn my acceptance, manufacture my identity, secure my own safety, or win anyone's approval — because You have already given me all of it in Christ.

Teach me to keep walking in what I have learned, to get help with what is too heavy to carry alone, and to pass on to others what You have so freely given me. And more than anything, teach me to simply be who You created me to be — present, at peace, secure, and free. In Jesus' name, amen.

You're Invited: Our Retreat

There is one more thing, and it is an invitation.

Some truths sink in best when we stop and sit with them together. So we are setting aside a full day — a six-hour retreat — to slow all of this down and work through it side by side. Not another lesson to get through, but time to breathe, to talk it out in small groups, to take our honest inventory in the company of people who know us, and to let what we have learned settle from our heads into our hearts.

This journey was never meant to be walked alone, and neither is this next step. We become the best of who God made us to be in the presence of people we love and trust — people who can remind us of the truth when we forget it, help us carry what is too heavy to carry by ourselves, and celebrate with us as we step into the freedom we have been discovering.

So come. Bring your questions, your inventory, and your open heart. Let's spend a day together learning to simply be who God created us to be — and helping one another become it. We would love to have you there.

WEEK 12

BE

The Retreat

The Emotional Regulation Retreat

A Six-Hour Gathering · River of Life Ministries

One idea holds the whole day: Barriers and Exchanges. BE. We spend the morning sharing the barriers we have wrestled with, and the afternoon sharing the exchanges that set us free. We are not re-teaching the eleven weeks. We are gathering to share the experience of having walked through them — telling our stories, praying for one another, and celebrating what God has done.

This is an outline, not a script. Keep it loose. The people are the content; the facilitator's job is simply to open each part warmly and then protect the space so honest sharing can happen. Let the timings breathe.

Morning — The Barriers

9:00 Gather

Coffee and tea, no agenda. Just be together — talk, laugh, settle in. The warmth of the room in this first half hour sets the tone for everything after. Open with a short welcome and a prayer when it feels right, not by the clock.

9:30 Setting the Table

A brief, warm framing of the day. Remind everyone why we came: not to be fixed, but to be freed — and to do it together. Name the two movements: this morning we share our barriers, this afternoon we celebrate our exchanges. Keep it short.

9:45 Sharing the Barriers

The heart of the morning. Invite people to share the barrier that gripped them most over these weeks — the pause they kept missing, the overloaded plate, the neglected need, the old wound, the rehearsed lie. Not a lesson review; a testimony of the wrestling. As people share, the room discovers no one struggled alone.

Let it be unhurried. Small groups or whole room, whichever fits how many are gathered. The facilitator listens more than talks, and gently makes sure quieter voices have room.

10:45 Praying One Another Through

These eleven weeks did not break down every barrier, and they were never meant to. So we pray for one another — honestly, specifically — over the barriers still being worked on. This is the point where sharing becomes ministry. Let people lay hands, speak truth, and carry one another's still-unfinished places to God.

11:30 Toward the Turn

A gentle close to the morning that names the hinge: we cannot break these barriers in our own strength, and we were never asked to. That is exactly why the afternoon exists — to receive what only God can give. Walk into lunch on that note.

The Turn — Lunch Together

12:00 A Great Lunch

Not a break from the retreat — part of it. This is the turn, the same hinge as the heart of the series: we go into the meal still talking about our own effort, and we come back ready to receive. Eat well, linger, enjoy each other. Something restful and unhurried.

Afternoon — The Exchanges

1:15 Sharing the Exchanges

The room turns from struggle to liberation. Invite people to share the exchange that broke something open — where they finally grasped, maybe for the first time, that they are already accepted, already known, already secure, already approved. The things about their walk with God that turned out to be so freeing they never want to lose them.

This is testimony, and it will get holy. Give it the most time of any segment. Let the joy build.

2:30 Continuing to Walk in It

A short, honest turn: these truths are easy to receive today and easy to forget on Monday. So we talk about how we keep walking in them — and how this room, these people, help each other remember. We hold one another to the freedom we have found.

3:00 BE

The closing movement, and the point of everything. Walk back through the whole journey one last time, and put the word be in front of each truth we have received. Say them slowly over the room, as a blessing:

Be present, instead of hijacked by the moment.

Be free of the weight you were never meant to carry.

Be renewed in your mind, no longer ruled by the lies you rehearsed.

Be at rest, no longer defending what God has already settled.

Be accepted — already welcomed, with nothing left to prove.

Be who God made you — known and called very good before you had done a thing.

Be secure — anchored in what no storm can reach.

Be free of the crowd — living for one voice, the Father's 'well done.'

And then the whole of it, spoken as the sending: now you can simply be who God created you to be.

3:30 Blessing and Sending

Close by praying over the room — a benediction, and a commissioning. We received all of this not only for ourselves but to give away. Send people out to be who God made them, and to help the people they love become who God made them, too. End in worship if it fits the room.

This is the whole day: gather, share the barriers, pray, feast, share the exchanges, and be sent to simply be.

Sources and Further Reading

The science in this study is offered lightly, always in support of Scripture rather than as a co-teacher. For those who wish to read further, the ideas touched on across these weeks draw on the following work.

On memory, thoughts, and the brain

Francine Shapiro — foundational work on how repeated material becomes accepted as true, and on memory and healing (the “Violets Aren’t Blue” illustration, Week 5).

Donald O. Hebb — the principle that “neurons that fire together, wire together,” underlying how rehearsed thoughts form well-traveled pathways (Week 5).

Michael Merzenich — research demonstrating neuroplasticity, the brain’s capacity to change through deliberate, repeated practice (Weeks 4 and 5).

On emotion and regulation

Amy Arnsten — research on how stress and depletion affect the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that helps us regulate and decide well (Weeks 1 and 3).

James Gross and Robert Levenson — studies distinguishing cognitive reappraisal (reconsidering meaning) from suppression (hiding the outward expression), underlying the RESET approach (Week 4).

Matthew Lieberman — research on “affect labeling,” the calming effect of putting feelings into words (Weeks 1 and 3).

James Pennebaker — work on the healing effect of honest, written expression (the journaling practices in Weeks 4 and 5).

Related resources by Cindy H. Carr, D.Min., MACL

God Made You and He Does Not Make Junk — a fuller journey into identity and the Design Discovery process, drawn on especially in Week 8. Available through CHC Connect at cindyhcarr.com.