

Recovering from Spiritual Trauma

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[0 : 00] We've had this observation show up in our community recently, and we've talked about it a couple times, and that's what this sermon series is going to be about, that for a lot of us, we've spent significant amounts of time working on our theology, working on our beliefs about God and Christianity and faith and justice.

And that's kind of become settled for us. We now believe in things that are no longer toxic or hateful or no longer causing us to have vitriol against others or to cast out entire sections of society.

We have a theology that seems like a more beautiful gospel, and God seems really far away. The way that we've said it is that our relationship with God sucks. God seems more distant than ever.

For some of us, and again, this is going to be towards sort of a particular set of people who have gone down that deconstruction and reconstruction path with their faith. Maybe they found faith as a child, and they've had to unlearn and relearn some things.

Maybe you found faith as an adult, and then you hit some really harsh realities about the immaturities of that faith, and you've had to start over again. But regardless, this is towards that sort of crowd of people.

[1 : 19] You've reworked your faith, but now all the things that you remember used to kind of set you on fire for Jesus. That now they seem corny, or dangerous, or maybe even triggering.

Things like church services, and worship songs, and even prayer. And I think for a lot of folks who find themselves in this boat, you want to feel God's presence again.

You want to feel spiritual, whatever that means. But it just seems like there's a barrier. You're stuck. You can't. Something that used to be alive inside of you is now dead.

Now, the good news about this is that you're not alone. One of the most hopeful phrases in the English vocabulary is, Me too, and I have heard these sorts of stories, not just from the one person I'm preaching at today, but from a variety of y'all.

You've worked on your theology, you've worked on your beliefs, but God still seems so distant. And you're not alone, because Scripture talks about this very thing.

[2 : 35] There's this psalm, Psalm chapter 42. I said I'm going to quote a bunch of poetry at you today. Psalm 42 has this songwriter having an argument with herself.

One part of her keeps asking, Why are you depressed? You shouldn't be depressed. And the other part of her responds, But you are, deal with it. So listen to Psalm 42. Just like a deer that craves streams of water, My whole being craves you, God.

My whole being thirsts for God, for the living God. When will I come and see God's face? My tears have been my food both day and night, As people constantly question me, Where's your God now? But I remember these things as I bare my soul, How I made my way to the Mighty One's abode, To God's own house. I used to do it with joyous shouts and Thanksgiving songs, A huge crowd celebrating the festival.

So I ask myself, Why are you so depressed? Why are you so upset inside, just hoping God?

Because I'll give him thanks again, My saving presence of my God.

[3 : 45] And then the other side of the author responds, But my whole being is depressed. That's why I try to remember you, God, From all the lands of my people, Deep has called out to deep, At the sound of your waterfalls, All the waves have surged over me, By day the Lord commands his faithful love, By night his song was with me, The prayer to God of my life, I will say to my God, my solid rock, Why have you forgotten me?

Why do I have to walk around sad and oppressed? With my bones crushed, my foes make fun of me. So I ask myself, Why are you so depressed?

Why are you so upset inside? Just open God, Because I will give him again thanks, My saving presence and my God. And so you hear this argument, This back and forth, I used to be, I used to be really into it.

I used to wish heaven was an eternal Hillsong concert. But now that just doesn't seem to do the trick anymore. I used to want to go to the house of God And experience the joy and the thanksgiving, And now I'm just sad and depressed and downcast, And I don't even know why. David, the author of Psalm 51, Begs God like this, Create a clean heart for me, God. Put a new faithful spirit deep inside of me.

[5 : 13] Please don't throw me out from your presence. Please don't take your Holy Spirit away from me. Return the joy of your salvation to me, And sustain me with a willing spirit.

And I feel like that prayer is sort of the rallying cry Of these next six or seven weeks of sermons. Return unto me, as the song says, The joy of my salvation.

For many of us, for a lot of us, There was this simple joy In knowing Jesus, In knowing God, In reading your Bible, In singing the worship songs, In going to church, In praying, In being part of a small group, And for many, many of us, That joy has subsided now Into either cynicism, Or despair, Or just sort of a going through the motions.

Your theology is solid. It's great. But God seems distant. So we're calling in this series Practicing Resurrection. Lent is a 40-day season That leads up to Easter.

And then Easter doesn't just end on Easter Day. It's actually the kickoff To a 50-day season called Eastertide Up till Pentecost. And so there's the folks Who designed the church calendar centuries ago.

[6 : 28] They did that on purpose. That the fasting would last Not as long as the feasting That happens in Eastertide. And so these 50 days Are meant to be An occasion of celebration and joy That Christ has risen.

He has risen indeed. That the resurrection Is the big bang of new creation. And so in this series We want to look at our own lives With God And hopefully see some resurrection In there as well.

So the phrase Practice Resurrection Comes from a poem I told you, more poetry By an American novelist Poet Climate activist And farmer Windleberry And the poem goes like this Love This is written in the 70s by the way Love the quick profit The annual raise Vacation with pay Want more of everything ready-made Be afraid to know your neighbors And to die And you will have a window Into your head Not even your future Will be a mystery anymore Your mind will be punched In a card And shut away In a little drawer When they want you to buy something They will call you When they want you to die for profit They will let you know So, friends Every day Do something that won't compute Love the Lord Love the Lord Work for nothing Take all that you have And be poor Love someone who does not deserve it Denounce the government And embrace the flag Hope to live in that free republic For which it stands Give your approval to all You cannot understand Praise ignorance For what man has not encountered He has not destroyed Ask the questions That have no answers Invest in the millennium Plant sequoias Say that your main crop Is the forest That you did not plant That you will not live to harvest Say that the leaves Are harvested When they have rotted Into the mold Call that profit Prophesy such returns Put your faith In the two inches Of humus That will build Under the trees Every thousand years Listen to Carrion Put your ear close And hear the faint chattering Of the songs That are to come Expect the end of the world Laugh Laughter is immeasurable Be joyful Though you have considered All the facts

So long as women Do not go cheap for power Please women More than men Somebody just asked me A little bit ago About why there's so few men At the table church It's because we read poems Like these So long as women Do not go cheap for power Please women More than men Ask yourself Will this satisfy A woman satisfied To bear a child Will this disturb The sleep of a woman Near to given birth Go with your love To the fields Lie easy in the shade Rest your head In her lap And swear allegiance To what is nighest To your thoughts And as soon as The generals And the politicians Can predict The motions of your mind Lose it Leave it as a sign To mark the false trail The way you didn't go Be like the fox Who makes more tracks Than necessary Some in the wrong direction Practice Resurrection Now Pastor TONETTA She was a Used to be a high school English teacher And so she would be

[9 : 59] The better one To lead us In like a critical analysis Of this poem But I'll do my best Notice Notice that For Wendell Berry Practicing resurrection Is not this like Super spiritual act Instead it's earthy And it's tangible And it's physical And the Bible speaks Of resurrection And life with God In

the same way Like if you listen To Jesus' parables They all have this Sort of earthy Physical tangible Quality to them The kingdom of heaven Is like a mustard seed That's sown And planted into a field And it grows up Into the largest plant And then the birds Of the air Find their nest in it The kingdom of heaven Is like yeast That a woman Works into dough And then it finds Its way Into all of the dough The kingdom of heaven Is like a treasure Hidden In a field Worth selling Everything you have And purchasing The kingdom of heaven Is like a net Let down To catch fish It's like a wedding banquet Where everyone

Is invited Even those Who live on the wrong Side of the tracks The kingdom Is like a farmer Sowing seed Spreading it Wherever it will go The kingdom According to Jesus Is not fluffy clouds It's not harps And pearly gates Rather Jesus' parables And Jesus' explanation Of the kingdom of heaven Is about the stuff You can touch And taste And smell And see It's like dirt Under the fingernails It's not super spiritual Acts of mysticism It's banquets And seeds I mean just look At the way That Jesus Spends his time After his resurrection I pointed out Last week That Jesus Is resurrected He spends most Of his first day In a new body With a bunch Of sad people He doesn't go To Caesar He doesn't go To Pilate He doesn't go To his enemies And try to get Vindication Rather he goes To his sad Grieving disciples And spends the day With them And He keeps eating Luke 24

Chapter Yeah Verse 30 Jesus meets With the disciples On the road To Emmaus He walks To them To their house And it's when Jesus breaks bread That the disciples Are like Oh I know Who you are now You're the guy Who's always Like eating stuff Eleven verses later Jesus appears To the disciples You're in a locked room They think they're Seeing a ghost And Jesus is like Ah no Can I have some more Food please John chapter 21 Jesus shows up On the beach The disciples Are fishing in a boat They see the smoke Rising from the beach Peter jumps out Of the boat Swims to shore And there's Jesus Cooking some fish For the disciples To share a meal With him Jesus' Resurrection life Again is not Clouds and harps And the eternal Worship concert It is Stuff here On earth And so I think If we are to Practice resurrection In our own lives In our own Quote unquote Spiritual life We have to talk About our bodies

About things That are tangible And earthy And have to do With food And drink And fellowship And this thing We call reality And that's not to say That so-called Spiritual things Don't matter Singing And prayer And meditation And preaching And visions And prophecy And spiritual gifts All of that matters too But it matters because Of their physicality Not in spite of it Spirituality is at its best When it is very physical Singing is powerful Because it engages Our lungs And our voices And when you hear a drum It gets all of our hearts Beating In the same rhythm Prayer and meditation Are powerful Because it slows down Our breathing And our heart rate And it stills our bodies Spending time together In a space like this Or in a home Or around a table Is a spiritual act But it's powerful Because it's a physical act That gets us together And we start sharing The stories of our lives And eventually sharing The scars of our lives

So if we are to Practice resurrection If we are to experience The joy of our salvation Once again This only can't be A sermon series About a bunch of like Quote-unquote Spiritual practices only Though I love Spiritual practices It's about what we do With our bodies Now In order to sort of Like plow the path For the preachers That are going to come After me For the next few weeks If we are going to Talk about Our spiritual lives If we are going to Talk about practicing Resurrection If we are going to Talk about Our theology being great But our relationship With God Sucking Then we have to Talk about Trauma and spiritual Abuse Okay So a bit of a Content warning If you don't want to Hear about trauma And spiritual abuse You're welcome to Go to the bathroom Find a snack Find a drink Take a walk And come back When we're ready For communion That's okay So trauma To give you a quick Definition Is an event Or an experience That overwhelms A person's

[15 : 02] Capacity To cope Trauma is an event Or an experience Or a series of events Or experiences That overwhelms A person's Capacity To cope So if you Go into the world With sort of The normal Tool bag Of tools That everyone has To get along With people And society And feelings And emotions And social interactions And then you Encounter an event Or a series of events That overwhelms That normal Set of tools That is A traumatic Experience Okay And it's important To remember That what may be Trauma for you May not be Trauma for someone Else And vice versa So you can't Just say This by itself Is a traumatic Experience And that's true For everyone Everyone has A different Sort of Threshold Of what could Be traumatic For them Depending on Their background The tools That were given To them In their childhood Things like that So that's

Trauma And there are A variety Of different Kinds of trauma Physical trauma Is pretty easy To understand If you are In a car accident And if you are In an injury It overwhelms Your physical body's Capacity to cope With like the Normal interactions Of like gravity And physics And something Breaks Something gets Bruised And so that's Physical trauma But there's also Emotional trauma And social trauma And there is Spiritual trauma Now to talk about Spiritual trauma We got to talk About spiritual abuse So I want to Give you a definition Spiritual abuse Is a form Of emotional And psychological Abuse And it's Characterized By a systematic Pattern Of coercive And controlling Behavior In a religious Context Spiritual abuse Can have a Deeply damaging Impact on those Who experience it And this abuse May include Manipulation Exploitation Enforced Accountability Censorship

Of decision making Requirements Of secrecy And silence Coercion To conform An inability To ask questions Control Through the use Of sacred texts Or teaching The requirement Of obedience To the abuser The suggestion That the abuser Has a divine position Isolation As a means Of punishment And superiority And elitism And this comes From a book Called Escaping The Maze Of Spiritual Abuse And it's kind Of become a Standard Definition For this sort Of thing Now if you Have spent any Time in Religious environments Like churches There can be a Tendency to Migrate towards Any one of Those items In that list And sometimes Maybe even Oftentimes It starts out As a Good intent Pastors People like me Spiritual leaders We want people

To grow We want people To experience Jesus We want people To you know Have a great Spiritual life And so Any organization Requires some Amount of Commitment making Boundary setting Rule making And if you Try to have An organization Without any of That Things fall apart Pretty quickly But because Humans are Humans And because People tend To seek Power Those good Intentions can Very easily Get twisted Into Abuse And it Becomes abuse When there Is an Asymmetry In power Between a Person with Some kind Of spiritual Authority And somebody Else It's most Noticeable When it's Not just a Single case But it's A continual Pattern And it Can penetrate An entire Church Culture That it Becomes Systemic And then It's Psychological And it's Emotional And it's Spiritually Wounding So that's Trauma And abuse Now Why bring This up Right now Well the Thing about Trauma Is that it Can ruin What's Good As a Silly Example I Used to Really Love Chorizo Like the Mexican Sausage And it's A spicy Sausage Used to Really love It's great In breakfast Food It's great In tacos And burritos It's really Really good Food I used To really Love Chorizo Until I got Food Poisoning And up Came the Chorizo Another content Warning Sorry Perfect And then It became Really difficult To even Like look At chorizo Ever again Okay Trauma And abuse Is a Form of Poisoning Against even Things that Can by Themselves be Good And so the

[20 : 04] Things that Used to Move you Worship music And prayer And church Services And small Groups And bible Studies All of Those things That maybe Used to Move you Closer to God Give you A sense Of connection With the Divine You put That in An abusive Or traumatic Environment Long enough And then It becomes Like Poisoned Chorizo The things That used To move You closer To God Have now Been poisoned And now You try To come Back to Them And it's Just not The same And I Think that You I think That happens To a lot Of the Folks that Show up Here at The table Of you Come to A Sunday Environment Like this You go To a Small group You hear The worship Songs You do A bible Study And you Go into It Some of You have Gone into It with Great intent You're ready To connect With God Again Maybe you've Come back To the Church After you've Experienced Any form Of discrimination Any form Of hatred You come

Back to Church You're ready To connect With God And then It's just Not the Same And it's It's not Just like A wax The power That it Used to But it's Like making You sick Inside And in You Some of You have Explained to Me like This tension That you feel Within yourself If you want To get close To God Again You want To engage In these Spiritual Practices Again But every Time you Try It feels Poisoned It feels Awful Now the Good news About trauma Is that you Can heal From it If you Have a Traumatic Experience In your Life If you Had These Adverse Things That have Happened In your Past You can't Heal From trauma Okay The Harder Thing about It though Is abuse And trauma Can make The things That work Towards your Healing Seem Seem Seem Bad To you And so It creates This paradox Where The things That you Need To Heal From spiritual Trauma And abuse They make You sick But to Critically Proven Fact That the One thing That can Help someone Heal From Abuse Neglect Or trauma Is Relationship But in The foster And adoptive World Which is I come I was a Foster kid I come Out of That world And I've Studied a lot Of stuff

Within that World Children that Suffer neglect Or abuse Begin to fear All forms Of relationship And so the Very thing That they Need Is the Very thing That they're Afraid of Because That good Thing Was used To hurt Them So the Same thing Can happen In a Spiritual Life Where the Very thing That you Need To connect With god Those Earthy Tangible Practices Well they Were used To harm You And so Our bodies Have this Defense mechanism Which is good It's protecting You It's a It's a Tool But it's Preventing You From healing So we

End up in This paradox Where we Want to Feel close To god But community And small Groups And prayer And bible Study And worship And music And meditation They now Taste like Food Poisoned Chorizo And so What the Series is Wanting to Do is Offer some Tools to Unpoison The well Now to do That to Sort of End it Tonight I just Want to Begin with The reminder That god Is good Which you Know Sounds really Simple and Obvious But i think One of the Most basic Lies that We can Be told And that We can Believe That can Sink down Deep inside Of us Is that God is Good but It's not The goodness That you Expect God is Good but Good and Like you Can't trust Your own Understanding about What good Is god's Ways are Far above Our ways Our Righteousness Is like Filthy rags God is Good but You don't Know what It is so You just Have to Trust that Whatever We say God is Good means That's what It means And don't Trust yourself And that's Where we talk a little bit about trusting yourself again next week But when we say something like god is good I believe the language has to mean something in order for it to be useful And so Jesus tells us Matthew chapter 7 Ask and you will receive Search and you will find Knock and the door will be opened to you For everyone who asks receives Whoever seeks Finds And to everyone who knocks The door is opened Who among you Would give your child a stone When they ask for bread Or give them a snake When they ask for fish If you Who are evil Jesus kind of throwing down there If you are evil Know how to give good gifts to children How much more will your heavenly parent Give good things to those who ask In other words When we say god is good

[25 : 06] It's not like a trick It's not like a theological gotcha If you know what goodness is How much more good is god's goodness And so you know I encourage a lot of folks in our church Who are experiencing spiritual trauma and abuse Who have in their life To you know Practice some basic like meditation Centering prayer sort of tools And they hit this barrier right away Because there's a fear about going to god That god's basic posture towards us Is one of anger and vengeance And so one of the first things That somebody has to Deconstruct Is that god is against you And that god's basic posture towards you Is anger and hatred If we know how to give good gifts to children How much more does god know How to give good things to those who ask And so I want to conclude tonight's sermon

With a simple meditation Going back to the words of Psalm 52 And we're just going to Slowly say these words out loud together And this comes from Eugene Peterson's message translation of the Psalms And we're just going to Say these as a prayer With some deep breaths in between each line And make this sort of the basic Ask and seek and knock Of our next six or seven weeks together So Let's say a line out loud together Do a deep inhale and exhale And then say the next line All together God make a fresh start in me Take a deep breath The next two lines Shape a genesis week From the chaos of my life

Together You won't throw me out with the trash Or fail to breathe holiness in me Together Bring me back from the gray exile Last line Put a fresh wind In my sails Put a fresh wind Put a fresh wind