

When Faith Feels Empty (That's Normal)

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[0 : 00] Amen. So we started a series last week called What Lies Beneath Then. We're taking basically a big, long, summer-long series on the idea of transformation and spiritual formation and discipleship.

And we're trying to figure out the ways that we can dig deep into our souls and find the ways that we can grow up into the image of Christ.

Now, I want to start with an example. Hopefully, we all know by now that you cannot trust what you see on the Internet, right? And that becomes more and more true every single day, that you cannot trust that there's an image or even a video put in front of you.

You have to do some research. You have to figure out, is this true? Is this accurate? Was this made up by AI or Photoshop or whatever? And I want to show you some images that show what I mean. This is an art project by somebody who was showing sort of Instagram versus real life.

So here's somebody. They're doing a wonderful headstand. Look at that. Next photo. What's going on in the rest? Oh, okay. So I don't have to feel alone in the fact that I can't do a headstand in a field like that.

[1 : 09] Next photo. Here's somebody who's posing on the tennis court. This might be Tanetta sometime this summer on her sabbatical. But zoom out. See the rest of the image. And yeah, she's not actually playing tennis. Somebody else is on the court.

Somebody else is looking at the photographer and being like, what are you doing? Next image. Here's somebody posing with a cityscape in the background. Zoom out. And it's just like, you know, a dirty roof with some air conditioning units and an antenna and all of that.

Next image. Here's somebody posing with a windy day on the beach. Next, zoom out. And there's like some trash and some flip-flops and, you know, some people playing in the background.

Next image. Here's somebody's beautiful little cactus collection. Aw, with a palette. In like, you know, what looks like a very sizable backyard for DC.

This is really blown out. Sorry. Here's somebody's like, you know, Instagram photo of their plate and their food and their cookbook. Next image. With all of the mess of everything around it.

[2 : 19] And the cat trying to get to the food, which I love. The bottom left. Is there one more? Yeah, here's somebody's workspace. Labeled my workspace with a laptop and a little globe and all of that.

Zoom out. And there's reality. This looks like my daughter's bedroom with all the clothes on the bed. Sorry, I shouldn't call out my daughter from the stage.

Is that all the images setting? Yeah, that's it. Yeah, so we know that there is the cropped-in version of life. And there's the zoomed-out image of life. There's the part that we want people to see.

The part that we curate. The part that we present to the world. And then there's everything else.

And some of this is good and responsible. We don't need to overshare every single bad thing in our lives with every single person on the internet.

That's what the Kardashians are for, okay? Instead, we curate, we zoom in, we crop, and then there's everything else. Everything can be filtered and captioned for maximum impact.

[3 : 18] But what happens when the camera stops rolling? What happens when you zoom out? So in our image art for this series, we're sort of using the metaphor of the iceberg. So go ahead and put that iceberg image up.

And on the iceberg, you have the 10% that you can see. And that represents our behavior and our practices and our language. The part that we present to the world. And then the majority of the iceberg is underneath the surface.

The part that you can't see. Our beliefs and our thoughts and our feelings and our assumptions and our values and our fears and our needs and our culture. And all of that stuff that we bring into every space.

And then the little bit that pops up top that actually shows up in the world. And what we're exploring is this iceberg effect of the human experience. There's the 10% of what shows up in a space like this.

A Sunday service. Out getting coffee. Going to small group. What we present to everybody in our lives. And then there's the 90% that remains below the surface. And oftentimes, following Jesus can be about spit shining the 10%.

[4 : 22] Do I look and sound and feel Christian enough? Christian enough to sort of get in and belong. And then not allowing the Holy Spirit, Christ Jesus, God, that anything to do with the 90% that remains hidden beneath the surface.

We crop in for the nice Instagram photo. And we don't want God to see the other 90%. So I invite you to turn to your Bibles, to the book of Exodus chapter 2.

If you have a physical Bible, an iPad, a phone, whatever works for you. We're going to be in Exodus chapter 2. Looking at this sort of middle section of Moses' life.

The middle section of Moses' life. So Moses' life begins with a baby in a basket, sit down the Nile River, rescued by Pharaoh's daughter.

And then the latter half of Moses' life is the Exodus and the Red Sea and the plagues and the wilderness wanderings for 40 years.

[5 : 28] But there's a middle section that, even in Scripture, doesn't get a lot of press, doesn't get a lot of time, but represents about 40 years of Moses' life. Moses lived in Egypt for 40 years.

He was out in the wilderness for 40 years. And then he called the Israelites out of slavery and wandered with them for 40 years. And so the Instagram version of Moses is Prince of Egypt, one of my favorite movies.

We watch it every year as kids. He's a prince. He's raised by Pharaoh's daughter. He gets all of the rights and responsibilities and privileges of being a prince of Egypt.

He's raised in Pharaoh's palace. He has access to power and privilege. And if Moses had Instagram, his feed would have been incredible. Palace life, access to Egyptian education, proximity to power, the ultimate privilege story.

But then there's the reality version, the zoomed out version. He's a displaced child. He is, I'm sure he has survivor's guilt, as many of his generation were put to death by the Egyptian authorities.

[6 : 30] And he was rescued out of the waters. That's what his name means, to be rescued out of the waters, Moses, out of the reeds, and brought up while the rest of his generation had died.

He has this traumatic upbringing. He would have qualified for a diagnosis of complex developmental trauma, something that I can relate to with a messed up background myself. And he's witnessing injustice daily.

He knows he looks a little different from the Egyptians that are raising him. He knows he looks more like the Hebrew slaves. And he's watching his relatives, his father and mother figures, putting his relatives into slavery.

And he gets to witness this as he's sitting in the palace. Underneath the curated image is a displaced child watching his people suffer daily.

And the trauma of knowing that your identity is built on others' oppression, something that Americans in general, white Americans in particular, can empathize with.

[7 : 31] So, Exodus chapter 2, verse 11, says this. One day, after Moses had grown up, so he's an adult, a man now, he went out to his people, and he saw their forced labor.

And he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. And he looked this way and that. I love that mental image of just, like, looking to see who's looking. And seeing no one, Moses killed the Egyptian and hid him, buried him in the sand.

It goes on. He went out the next day, and he saw to you Hebrews fighting. And he said to the one who was in the wrong, Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew? And he answered, Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?

Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian? So Moses has some anger issues. And this is a recurring theme in Moses' life as you track his story throughout the Pentateuch, through Exodus numbers, Deuteronomy.

That Moses reaches this breaking point after years of witnessing injustice, after years of living with his own traumatic upbringing, living with a split identity.

[8 : 47] His buried rage comes to the surface. And the first instance he gets, the first moments he gets to act out on that rage, he takes it, and it explodes into violence.

And so then there was a literal body buried in the sand. Freud would have a heyday with this, right? He takes a body, kills it, buries it. And this isn't a one-time incident for Moses.

Later on, Moses is going to strike a rock out of anger when God tells him to speak to a rock. It's the rage that gets him barred from the promised land. The buried body in the sand represents all of the trauma and the rage and the pain that many of us, I know myself, think that I can just cover up and move on from.

But buried bodies have a way of surfacing. Verse 15. Moses, this is verse 14. Moses was afraid and thought, Surely this thing that I have done is known.

And when Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. So Moses fled from Pharaoh. So he acts on his rage and then hides from it. He flees, he runs away, and he settles in the land of Midian and sits down by a well.

[9 : 59] So Moses, the one who was rescued out of the water, now becomes a refugee, an exile. Everything that he thought he had now gets stripped away.

Which may sound familiar to some of our own familial family or religious experiences here. Maybe you came out and you lost family and friends. Maybe you left your religious community and you lost all the connections that you thought were going to last forever.

Maybe you owned your race, your blackness, your brownness, your queerness, your full self, and you found yourself in exile. Now the first thing I want to get straight about the wilderness, that the wilderness is not punishment.

The wilderness is a recurring theme throughout scripture. And wilderness is often a place where a person or a people go for preparation. It's where Jesus is driven out to by the Spirit.

And the Spirit is not punishing Jesus by putting him in the wilderness. The Spirit, she's preparing Jesus for the ministry that's to come. Moses out here, he flees to the wilderness on his own free will, out of fear, out of wanting to keep the bodies buried in the sand.

[11 : 14] And God's going to do something incredible out in the wilderness. I know that I have been taught, handed a tradition that said that wilderness seasons are God's discipline or punishment on me.

But what if they're actually hospitals, places where healing really begins? What if exile is an invitation, the preparation before the real work? The Christian mystics of former centuries called this time purgation.

And purgation is this stripping away of the false self, a stripping away of whatever toxic system and harmful belief that has been sort of embedded into our lives.

And purgation feels awful. It's like when you drink poison, you go to the hospital and you have to get your stomach pumped. It feels terrible. It feels like death. It's actually the first stage of spiritual formation.

And this is the part where many of us, I know myself, I want to run away. I want to quit. I know often I have been in spiritual seasons of dryness, aridity, whatever the opposite of D.C. humidity is.

[12 : 25] And it's a place where my immediate instinct is to think, God's punishing me, God's pushing me away. No, no, no, no. What if that's when God's drawing me in? What if it's the place where maturity begins?

Moses spent 40 years in Midian. As an ordinary shepherd, a daily routine, and hidden healing happening underneath.

40 years. It's longer than some of us have been alive. Moses isn't doing ministry. He's not changing the world. He isn't even particularly religious. He's just tending sheep, processing trauma, learning to be present, distancing himself from the Egyptian oppressors who raised him.

The mystics call this illumination, slowly learning to see God. It took 40 years of unlearning from Egyptian prince to Moses the deliverer before Moses was ready to see the burning bush.

The illumination of learning to see God and self and the world more clearly. And this ordinary work is preparing him for everything that comes next.

[13 : 39] Again, this is a common pattern in Scripture. Jesus didn't begin ministry until he was deep into his 30s. After Paul's Damascus Road experience, most of us sort of forget this because Acts

doesn't tell the full story, but Paul tells in Galatians that after Paul's Damascus Road experience of seeing Jesus on the road, Paul spent anywhere from 3 to 13 years, depending on how you do the math, in the desert and in obscurity, Paul actually went back to Sinai to taking a pilgrimage to the place where Moses met God at the burning bush.

And Paul just disappears off the scene for a while before he gets called up by Barnabas to start his missionary work. So in the wilderness, in Midian, in the ordinary sort of humdrum of life is where Moses is made from prince into deliverer.

And I think many of us have our own bodies buried in the sand, things in our lives where we feel shame or guilt or grief, and we want to leave them there.

I have my own. My brother died in 2018, and it was due to alcoholism and a car accident.

And I'll show you some photos of me and my brother David. This is us. We were homeschooled.

This is not how we dressed every day. This is how people thought we dressed every day.

[15:08] We have a better picture if you want to show the next one. This is us looking suave. Go ahead and show him the zoomed in one. I mean, look at that. Look at that. Now, unfortunately, even though I did not wear suspenders on the daily, my hair really did have the bowl cut with the part down the middle.

I can't lie. I can't pretend. Now, David always was the cool one. He was the one who always had, like, girls hitting on him and, like, was just super cool. This was me performing at my brother's wedding.

I was looking for a good picture of me and my brother. So this was my first attempt, and this is me looking pretty dorky and David looking pretty amazing. Try another one.

No, no, no, no. There's a... Go back. Yeah, here's another one. Yeah, there's another dorky image.

Yeah, I apparently cannot photograph well while performing a wedding.

Which, by the way, if you ever need me to perform your wedding, go ahead and head to the website and you can ask me and you can get pictures like this. But me and my brother David, we were homeschooled together. We did everything together. We surfed and we hit the beach and we did 4-H club and we did youth group.

[16:12] He drummed. I played piano. Like, everything. We did everything together. He had this wandering period and he came back to God and then he lost his job and drank too much and died. And up to that point, I had had a pretty terrible life in my early life and then I got adopted and then I became a Christian and I became a pastor.

And my theology was, like, neat and tidy and I believed that anything bad in the world was because of free will. We couldn't blame God. And I've had the grace, the gift of never really doubting a belief in God.

And by the way, my therapist would want me to tell you that, look, I'm using comedy and bad funny pictures to talk about something really hard. Go me. But then my brother died.

He had a wife. I performed his wedding. He had a kid. He gets himself killed. And that neat and tidy theology sort of begins to fall apart. And all of the way, all of the sort of Q&A; that I could have given, why do bad things happen to good people?

Why do bad things happen at all? I had to question more and more and more. I had to face my own sort of buried bodies and my buried bodies were not like people that I had killed, but all the loss and heartache and grief that I had suffered in my life.

[17:23] Now I had to confront and say, what if my neat and tidy theology doesn't really work anymore? And my spiritual life went to, I have a bad word written here. I know there are kids in the room. My spiritual life went to poo, okay?

It did not go well. St. John of the Cross, 16th century mystic monk, he wrote this about our spiritual lives when we enter the dark night of the soul.

He says, the things that used to move you, that made you feel close to God, now make you feel sick. Anybody relate to that? The things that used to move you and make you feel close to God, now make you feel sick.

That is what trauma and heartache and grief and spiritual trauma does. The very practices that brought life now feel dangerous or empty. It's like when you're eating your favorite food and then you have a bad experience, you get food poisoning from your favorite food and you never want to touch it again.

Something that used to nourish you now makes you feel nauseated. And that's the way spirituality and theology felt to me after the death of my brother. That everything that felt nourishing now made me feel sick.

[18 : 31] I had a small group, different church, a small group that imploded. All these people that were in our home, we were in their homes, we were cooking for each other, watching each other's kids, all of that.

One left the faith, just left Christianity entirely. One left the church. One person revealed an affair. One person basically broke up with us and just sat us down and said, hey, it's been really nice knowing you.

We're never going to speak again. And these are people that I had spent hours and days with, caring for, teaching, discipling. Which then meant I had to confront my own buried expectations about ministry, about investing in people, which is a nice sort of capitalistic word.

If I invest in you enough, then I will get a return on investment. If I give enough of myself to you, then you owe me something. Something very similar happened even within our first couple years here, of all the people in our small group eventually drifting away.

Which meant I had to have this depth of investment ministry. That all of the things that make me sort of a decent leader and teacher and people person were also, had a dark side, were all of the ways in which I was bringing my shadow side in the ministry, that I needed your attaboys and pats on the back to feel value.

[20 : 01] As somebody with, you know, sort of abandonment issues because of my childhood and someone who's always afraid of somebody leaving me and thinking badly of me to have those sorts of things happen on the reg, meant that I had to renegotiate my relationship with why was I a pastor.

People deserve love without an ROI, without a return on investment. Ministry isn't about me getting my attaboys. It's about following the way of Jesus, of self-sacrificial, others-oriented love.

2021, vaccines come out. The church officially became, like, in the documentation, LGBTQ affirming. We moved our governance from pastor-centric to elder-centric.

We survived the pandemic. We moved, you know, had to move online and then started in-person services again. We hired Tinetto, all of that. And I, I do great in a crisis.

I do really good when things, like, are flaming, burning, and that's when my strength sort of rise to the top. And then when things became sort of settled, I had to confront, like, oh, what do I do now?

[21 : 15] I hit this wall. The adrenaline was gone. I was left with humdrum, Midian, wilderness. Now, again, the dark night of the soul is not punishment.

It is about breaking with the lies of self-hatred. The dark night isn't God proving to us how awful we are. It's breaking agreement with the lie that I suck.

Lies that sometimes some versions of Christianity tell us or lies that toxic family system present to us. Lies that white supremacy and patriarchy whispered in our ears or maybe screamed in our faces.

And what if spiritual dryness, that dark night of the soul when we're confronted with our buried bodies and our hardest moments and all the wrong reasons that we're doing the right thing, what if that is actually liberation from performance?

Every year of childhood that I was in a toxic faith system or a toxic family system, I needed like three to four years of healing from it. Which by the way, don't start doing the math in your head, this is not a formula, okay?

[22 : 29] So the dark night, it's not divine punishment, it is liberation from spiritual performance, it is freedom from toxic faith system. St. John of the Cross in his book, he talks about the sweetness of early faith fading.

And it's not failure, but it's graduation to a deeper love. I think many of us have experienced that when you first become a Christian, when you first find a church community that you love, it feels sweet, it feels you're on fire for God.

Every Bible study and worship song and prayer feels like you're just moving closer to the divine. And then as it fades, you begin to feel that sense of guilt or shame. Oh, was it not real?

Am I not good enough? Am I not being faithful enough? But I want you to understand that when the sweetness fades, it's not proof that you never loved God. It's not proof that God is angry with you, that everything you ever felt was a lie.

It means that love is growing into maturity. When worship stops giving you goosebumps and when Bible study feels more triggering than nourishing, when prayer feels empty, this isn't spiritual failure. [23 : 34] It's graduation to a more mature love. You're moving from loving God because it feels good to love God to loving God because we actually want to love God.

Like after the honeymoon phase of any relationship, not just romantic, friendships, romantic otherwise, when the excitement fades and the love remains, the few friends that you have that are not based out of convenience or because they're in the dorm or the apartment next door, but because you decided it was worth the work and the time and the effort.

And the sweetness fades. It's not as easy, but it's good. And this is what the mystics called union. Not spiritual highs, not mountaintop experience after mountaintop experience, but steady, faithful presence.

What Eugene Peterson called the long obedience in the same direction. For me, this meant that, so I had a professor in college and he was one of the folks who performed at Million and I's wedding and he taught us very early on about a rule of life, of the sort of trellis that you build your spiritual disciplines on and you make a commitment to following in the way of Jesus in this way.

And he taught it as very important to pastors in particular because even for us sort of paid professional Christians, the first things to go in our life is our spiritual disciplines because there's always more administrative work to do, more people to be with, and our own spiritual lives can wither on the vine.

[25 : 03] So we built this rule of life and I had it for a decade plus because I knew how important it was. But it had to die. That's part of what happened in the wilderness is that my spirit, my rule of life had to die because it became about spiritual scorekeeping.

Could I keep the, could I keep the check marks going? Could I keep the streak moving? I had to die to performance metrics of my own spiritual life and move into simple presence with God.

God, I'm angry. God, I'm upset. God, I don't understand. God, I hate telling God that I don't know things. But I had to. I had to go through a season of spiritual simplicity.

No counting verses or chapters or number of minutes prayed. Just being with God. So the rule of life had to die and then there is a return to a practice.

Sometimes many of the same disciplines, but with a different heart without the baggage of being able to move towards God, not out of obligation, not because I was afraid of God's anger if I didn't do it, but because I wanted just to be with a God who loved me and I could trust.

[26 : 20] When my spiritual disciplines became lifelines and not performance metrics. Back to Moses. This is Exodus chapter three. Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian.

And he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb or Sinai, the mountain of God. And there the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of bush.

He looked and he saw that the bush was blazing yet it was not consumed. So 40 years, Moses spins in the desert, in the wilderness, in Midian.

And 40 years later, God shows up. God shows up not to the prince of the palace, but to the traumatized shepherd in exile. The burning bush appears in the wilderness, not the castle.

God meets us in our own Midians and wildernesses, not on the mountaintop, but in the ordinary wilderness as traumatized shepherds.

[27 : 24] God doesn't wait for us to get our act together. God doesn't meet with a Moses who is full of confidence and ready to charge, but with a Moses who is not sure of himself, a Moses who was not expecting the divine.

God meets us in our exile and our ordinariness and in the midst of our healing process. The burning bush finds Moses, not the other way around. So for those in spiritual darkness, I want to say a few things.

You're not broken. There's nothing wrong with you when you move into that season of dryness, aridity, where it feels like God is distant and hard to hear and hard to perceive and the Bible study and the worship and the prayer and the small group and the church services feels hard and like moving, like running a marathon through gelatin.

You're not broken. There's nothing wrong with you. That is the path. That is what every mystic from the centuries has said, is that eventually what was easy becomes difficult and that means that things are moving along as expected.

