

SEPTEMBER 2026 BIBLE STUDY

Words of Transformation

*A six session study on the God who does not
throw the clay away*



FAITHLABZ

Welcome to Words of Transformation

This is a study about change. Not the kind you promise yourself in January. The kind that happens to you.

Most of us have already tried the other kind. We've made the list, downloaded the app, set the alarm earlier, and told ourselves that this time it would hold. And for a week or two it did. Then we went back to being exactly who we were, only now with the added weight of knowing we couldn't fix it.

The Bible is not embarrassed by that. It says the problem goes deeper than your habits. It says the part of you making the decisions is the part that needs the work, which is why you can't think your way out from the inside. And then it says something better: the one who made that part of you is not finished with it.

Over the next six sessions we're going to watch him do it. Not as a theory. As five true stories about five real people who were changed, told from the beginning, with nothing assumed. A prophet standing in a workshop watching a man rework a ruined pot. A fisherman warming his hands at two different fires. A vineyard, and the one holding the knife. A man knocked flat on a road he had no business being on. And an old man coming down a mountain with a face he couldn't see.

Each week has its own Hebrew or Greek word, sitting right where the Bible puts it. Words are how this study gets underneath the English. When you learn that the Hebrew word for heart isn't about feelings at all, a verse you've heard your whole life stops being a poster and starts being a diagnosis. That's what we're after. Not vocabulary. Sight.

A NOTE ON THE HARD PARTS

Two of these stories hurt. Jeremiah spends a night in stocks and then tells God he feels tricked. Peter says out loud, three times, that he never knew the man he loved most. We're not going to soften those, because softening them is what makes the Bible feel like it belongs to somebody else's life. The text is allowed to be as heavy as it is. That's exactly why the ending lands.

How to Use This Study

Built for a small group around a table, or one person with a cup of coffee. Together, a session runs about forty five to sixty minutes. Don't rush it. If a question opens up a real conversation, let it run long. That's the study working.

FOR SMALL GROUPS

Have one person read The Story aloud, or take turns by paragraph. Then work the Discussion Questions together. The Observation questions are the warmup and everybody can answer them. The Interpretation questions are where the room gets interesting. The Application questions are where it gets personal, and those are the ones to protect time for. Don't skip them because you ran long.

FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

Go at your own pace. Read The Story slowly, sit with the word cards, and use the Personal Reflection prompts for journaling. The Weekly Practice at the end of each session is the part that leaves the page and gets into your week.

WHAT'S IN EVERY SESSION

Overview and Opening Question	5 MINUTES
Scripture Reading	5 MINUTES
The Story, told from the beginning	10 TO 15 MINUTES
Word Study Spotlight, the week's Hebrew and Greek	5 TO 10 MINUTES
Discussion Questions: observation, interpretation, application	20 TO 25 MINUTES
Cross References and Personal Reflection	ON YOUR OWN
Weekly Practice, one small thing a day	THE WEEK AFTER
Closing Prayer Prompt	5 MINUTES

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A Bible in whatever translation you love (we quote the ESV, and we'll tell you the Hebrew or Greek when it changes something), something to write with, and a willingness to sit with a question that doesn't close cleanly.

Five People, One Month

August taught you to build the house. September is God working on the builder.

There are five sessions and then one more that ties them together. Each session is one person, told whole. You can read them in any order and each one stands on its own. But they were built to be read in this order, because they're five answers to the same question: how does God actually change a person?

1 The Potter's House

Jeremiah. A man who told the truth for forty years to people who would not hear it, and the afternoon God explained everything with wet clay.

2 The Two Charcoal Fires

Peter. One fire where he lied about knowing Jesus, one fire where Jesus cooked him breakfast, and the same rare word for both.

3 One More Year

The vineyard. A love song that turns into a judgment, a fig tree that gets a reprieve, and a Father with a pruning knife.

4 The Road to Damascus

Paul. The man who held the coats at an execution, and who spent the rest of his life writing about a mind being made new.

5 The Shining Face

Moses. An eighty year old shepherd asks to see God's glory, and comes down a mountain not knowing what happened to his face.

6 The Same Hands

Integration. Five tools, one craftsman. What the whole month was building, and what to do with it on Monday.

THE THREAD, BEFORE YOU START

Clay. Fire. A knife. Light. A face. Five images, and every one of them is the same hands doing the same work from a different angle. Session six is where they click together. It's worth knowing now that they're going somewhere: this month opens on a verse about the part of you that decides things and closes on a verse about what happens to a person who keeps looking at God. That's not an accident. That's the road.



SESSION ONE

The Potter's House

JEREMIAH ■ JEREMIAH 18 ■ WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 1

OVERVIEW

Six hundred years before Jesus, God gave a young man from a priest's family one job: tell your own country the truth. He did it for forty years and nobody listened. They beat him for it, locked him in stocks, burned what he wrote, and dropped him in a muddy pit to die. And in the middle of all of that, God sent him on the strangest errand in the book. Go down to the potter's house and watch a man make pots. What he saw there is the picture the whole month is built on.

OPENING QUESTION (5 MINUTES)

Think of something you made or built or started that went wrong while you were still working on it. A project, a recipe, a relationship, a plan. When it went sideways, what was your first instinct: fix it, start over, or walk away? What decides which one you pick?

SCRIPTURE READING

Read aloud: Jeremiah 18:1 to 12.

Reference passages: Jeremiah 1:4 to 10 (the call), Jeremiah 17:9 to 10 (the diagnosis), Jeremiah 19:10 to 11 (the second pot), Jeremiah 29:4 to 11 (the letter), Jeremiah 32:6 to 15 (the field).

THE STORY (READ ALOUD, 10 TO 15 MINUTES)

There's a village called Anathoth about three miles outside Jerusalem. Small place. Walking distance from the city, but not the city. Around 650 years before Jesus, a boy was born there into a family of priests. His father's name was Hilkiah. The boy's name was Jeremiah, and by every reasonable expectation he was going to grow up, put on the linen, and serve at the altar like his father did.

That isn't what happened. One day, while he was still young, God spoke to him.

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

JEREMIAH 1:5

Not a priest. A prophet. A priest carries what people bring to God. A prophet carries what God says to people, out loud, whether or not they want it. And Jeremiah's answer is the answer most of us would give.

Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.

JEREMIAH 1:6

He's a kid. He isn't a speaker. God tells him to stop saying that.

Do not say, "I am only a youth"; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the LORD.

JEREMIAH 1:7 TO 8

Read that promise again and notice what isn't in it. God promises to send him. God promises to give him the words. God promises to go with him and to get him out alive. God never once promises that anybody will listen.

They didn't. For forty years.

Here's the job he was given. His nation, Judah, had spent generations drifting away from God. There were idols on the hills and rigged courts in the city. And far to the east an empire called Babylon was rising, and it was going to come and burn Jerusalem to the ground inside Jeremiah's own lifetime. His assignment was to say so. To his own people. To their faces. For decades. Twenty three years into it, he summed the whole thing up in one sentence they must have hated.

For twenty-three years, from the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, to this day, the word of the LORD has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened.

JEREMIAH 25:3

Twenty three years of being right, and he still had about seventeen to go.

Now, a man who spends forty years watching people refuse to change learns something about why people don't. And Jeremiah names it. He doesn't blame the Babylonians or the kings or the economy. He goes lower than that.

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

JEREMIAH 17:9

We hear the word heart and think feelings. In Hebrew, *lev* is not your feelings. It's closer to your control room. It's where you think, where you decide, where you talk yourself into things and out of things. So read the verse again with that in it. The part of you that makes your decisions is the part that lies to you, and nothing on earth is better at it. That's terrifying news, and it's the honest reason your last plan for fixing yourself didn't hold. You made the plan in the room that's compromised.

Jeremiah asks who can possibly understand a thing like that. Then God answers his own question in the very next line.

I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.

JEREMIAH 17:10

The word behind *test* there is *bachan*, and it's a metal worker's word. It means to assay, to put a thing under heat and pressure to find out what it actually is. God isn't glancing at your control room from the doorway. He's assaying it. He built it, he can see all the way in, and he did not go in there to leave it the way he found it.

So what does he do about it? That's the question the next scene answers, and God doesn't answer it with a lecture.

Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.

JEREMIAH 18:2

Not the temple. Not the palace. A workshop. Go watch a man make pots.

Jeremiah goes. And here's what he sees.

So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.

JEREMIAH 18:3 TO 4

Two details in that sentence are worth slowing down for.

The first is the wheel. The Hebrew word is a dual, a form Hebrew uses for things that come in pairs, and it literally means *the two stones*. Picture a lower disc the potter turned with his foot and an upper disc where the clay sat, spinning together while his hands stayed free to work. It's a beautifully ordinary machine. The word shows up in only one other place in the whole Old Testament, and it's the birthstool the Hebrew midwives worked over in Egypt. Both times, it's the place where something comes into the world.

The second is the clay. The Hebrew is *chomer*, and it's not a precious material. It's the same word for the mortar Israel's slaves were forced to work with under Pharaoh, mixing mud and straw into bricks until their lives were bitter. *Chomer* is wet dirt. It's the cheapest stuff in the room.

And it goes wrong. Not on a shelf, not in the kiln, not after delivery. It's spoiled *in the potter's hand*, while he's working on it. Which is exactly where things go wrong in a life that God has his hands on.

So what does the potter do? He doesn't throw it across the room. He doesn't reach for a better lump. He reworks it. Same clay, same wheel, same hands, into another vessel, the one he wanted. And that's the moment God speaks.

You're the clay. He's the potter. You went wrong in his hands, and he's going to rework you in those same hands.

O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

JEREMIAH 18:6

Then God explains how the wheel actually turns. If he announces disaster on a nation and that nation turns from its evil, he relents of the disaster. And if he announces good over a nation and it turns to evil, he relents of the good. This is not a machine grinding out a fixed result. This is a craftsman with his hands on the material, responding to it. Which is why the whole scene lands on a single word of invitation.

Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.

JEREMIAH 18:11

Return. That's the door. Come back while you're still soft.

And here's their answer, which is one of the saddest sentences in the Bible.

But they say, "That is in vain! We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart."

JEREMIAH 18:12

Their own plans. The stubbornness of their heart. That's the control room, deciding to stay exactly where it is.

So God sends Jeremiah back to the potter, and this time the errand is different. Buy a finished flask, he says. Take the elders of the people and the elders of the priests out to a valley with you. And there, in front of all of them, Jeremiah smashes it on the ground and says this while the pieces are still lying there.

Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended.

JEREMIAH 19:11

Two pots. Same potter. Same clay, once.

The first one went wrong on the wheel while it was still wet, and he reworked it. The second one had already been through the fire. It was set. You cannot push a fired pot back into a lump, so there's nothing to rework. All you can do with it is break it.

And the difference between those two pots was never the potter. His hands were just as skilled the second time. The only difference was the clay. One was still soft. One had gone hard.

That's what the potter's house is about. God is telling a nation, and he's telling you, that he can rework anything still soft in his hands. Spoiled doesn't frighten him. Collapsed on the wheel doesn't frighten him. He does that every single day. Hard is the thing to be afraid of, because a fired pot doesn't get reworked. It gets broken.

Judah went hard. And it cost Jeremiah everything to keep saying so. A priest named Pashhur had him beaten and locked in stocks at the temple gate overnight, and the prayer he prayed the next morning is one of the rawest things in Scripture. He tells God, you deceived me and I was deceived. The Hebrew verb he picks there is the word used elsewhere for seduction, for talking somebody into something. He's accusing God of luring him into this. And then two lines later he admits he can't stop, because the word is like a fire shut up in his bones and he's worn out holding it in. Both of those things are in the Bible, on the same page, said by the same man. You're allowed to say the rawest true thing you have to God. Under that kind of weight, that's what faith sounds like.

Years later King Jehoiakim got a copy of everything Jeremiah had ever said, dictated to a secretary named Baruch. It was winter. The king sat by a fire pot, and as an official read three or four columns at a time, the king cut them off with a knife and dropped them in the fire until the whole scroll was gone. And the text makes a point of telling us that nobody in that room was even afraid. These were the educated men of the kingdom, the ones who counted themselves wise. Jeremiah had already written down what God says to people like that: don't boast in being smart, or strong, or rich. Boast in one thing only, that you know him. Everything you're good at can burn in an evening. Knowing God is the one thing that can't.

Then it happened. In 586 BC the city Jeremiah had warned for forty years burned exactly the way that flask broke. He was proved right in the worst way a person can be. He stayed behind with the poor who were left in the rubble, and he wrote the grief down, and that book is called Lamentations. And buried in the middle of the worst thing he ever saw is this.

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

LAMENTATIONS 3:21 TO 23

New every morning. Written by a man standing in ashes. New mercy shows up the morning after the worst day, not the morning after you finally feel better.

And there's one more thing he did, and it might be the strangest act of hope in the Bible. The Babylonian army was at the wall. Jeremiah was under arrest in the palace guard's court. And God told him to buy a field. So he did. He weighed out the silver, signed the deed in front of witnesses, and had it sealed in a clay jar so it would survive, because God had told him this:

Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

JEREMIAH 32:15

He bought real estate in a city that was about to fall, in a country he'd been told would be empty for seventy years. He would never farm it. Hope in the Bible isn't a feeling. It has a receipt.

Six hundred years later a Jewish scholar named Paul, a man who had hunted Christians before he carried their message across the Roman world, reached back for Jeremiah's potter while writing to the church in Rome. Who are you, he asks, to answer back to God? Does the potter have no right over the clay? The Greek word he uses for *molded* is *plasso*, which is where we get the word plastic, meaning something that can still be shaped. And a hundred years before Jeremiah, the prophet Isaiah had already prayed the clay's side of the same thing: you are our Father, we are the clay, and you are our potter, we are all the work of your hand. That's the right prayer. Not *why did you make me like this*. Instead: you're the potter, I'm still here, I'm still soft, keep going.

And it ends up better than a pot. Paul writes somewhere else that we have this treasure in jars of clay, so that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. Same wet dirt. And God puts the treasure inside it. The point of the pot was never the pot. It was what it would carry.

One last thing, because it's the thing that makes this good news instead of pressure. The clay doesn't keep itself soft. The potter does that. He's the one with the water. Another prophet named Ezekiel was sitting in exile in Babylon at the same time Jeremiah was in the rubble in Jerusalem, and God gave him the promise underneath this whole story: I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

God does not throw the clay away. He reworks it in the same hands that made it. Your part is not to become better clay. Your part is to stay where he can reach you.

WORD STUDY SPOTLIGHT

לב **lev** (*lev*)

STRONG'S H3820

MEANING The inner person. Mind, will, decision, moral center. Not primarily the emotions.

APPEARS 593 times in the Hebrew Bible

KEY VERSE The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

Every English reader hears "heart" and thinks feelings, which turns Jeremiah 17:9 into a line about being moody. It isn't. *Lev* is the control room: where you weigh, choose, justify, and decide. Jeremiah is saying the faculty you use to evaluate everything, including yourself, is compromised. That's why self improvement has a ceiling, and it's why the promise in Jeremiah 31:33, that God will write his law on the *lev*, is aimed at exactly the right place.

יצר **yatsar** (*yah-TSAR*)

STRONG'S H3335

MEANING To form or shape, the way a potter shapes clay. The participle form, *yotser*, is the word for a potter.

APPEARS about 62 times

KEY VERSE Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. (Jeremiah 1:5)

This is the hinge word of the whole session, and it's hiding in plain sight. The verb God uses for what he did to Jeremiah before birth is the same verb for what the man at the wheel is doing with his hands. It's also the verb in Genesis 2:7, where God forms the man from the dust. So when Jeremiah walks into that workshop, he isn't watching an illustration. He's watching his own origin story with the sound turned up.

חמר **chomer** (*KHO-mer*)

STRONG'S H2563

MEANING Clay, wet mortar, mud used for building. Also mire.

APPEARS about 30 to 33 times, depending on the count

KEY VERSE Like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. (Jeremiah 18:6)

Track this word back to Exodus 1:14 and you find it in Pharaoh's brickyards, the mortar that made Israel's lives bitter. *Chomer* is the material of slavery and the lowest thing in the shop. It carries no value on its own, which is the entire point. The worth of the finished vessel is not in the dirt. It's in whose hands the dirt is in.

בַּחַן **bachan** (*bah-KHAN*)

STRONG'S H974

MEANING To examine, to test, especially to assay metal by fire to prove what it truly is.

APPEARS 29 times

KEY VERSE O LORD of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind. (Jeremiah 20:12)

This is a refiner's word, and Jeremiah uses it twice about God and the human heart. The difference between *bachan* and the kind of test you fear matters: an assayer doesn't heat silver to find out whether it will fail. He heats it to bring out what's really in it. When Jeremiah prays this word from the worst morning of his life, he isn't accusing God of grading him. He's appealing to the one person who can actually see.

חָכָם **chakam** (*khah-KAHM*)

STRONG'S H2450

MEANING Wise, skilled. Someone who is genuinely good at something, practically or morally.

APPEARS 137 times

KEY VERSE Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom... but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me. (Jeremiah 9:23 to 24)

In Hebrew this word gets used for a skilled craftsman, a sailor who can read water, a woman who knows how to sing at a funeral. *Chakam* means competent. So the warning is not against being good at things. It's against hanging your life on being good at things. Jehoiakim's officials were the *chakam* of their generation, and the text says they weren't even afraid while the word of God went into the fire column by column.

חָדָשׁ **chadash** (*khah-DASH*)

STRONG'S H2318

MEANING To make new again. To renew, repair, restore something worn out.

APPEARS 10 times

KEY VERSE Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old. (Lamentations 5:21)

Notice the direction of the sentence. It's not "renew us so we can come back." It's "bring us back, and then renew us." Jeremiah, standing in the ruins of everything he warned them about, does not ask for a fresh start. He asks for the person who can give one. And he asks in the passive, because he knows by now which side of the wheel he's on.

MEANING A vineyard.

APPEARS 93 times

KEY VERSE Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. (Jeremiah 32:15)

A vineyard is the least portable thing a person can own. You don't plant one unless you intend to still be there in four years, because that's roughly how long it takes before it gives you anything. God picks that word on purpose while an army is at the wall. And hold onto it, because in session three the vineyard becomes the whole picture.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (20 TO 25 MINUTES)

OBSERVATION ■ WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

- 1 In Jeremiah 1:5 to 8, list everything God actually promises Jeremiah. Now list what he does not promise. What is missing from that list, and would you have signed up?
- 2 Read Jeremiah 18:1 to 6 slowly. Where exactly does the pot go wrong? What does the potter do with it, and what does he not do?
- 3 Compare Jeremiah 18:4 with Jeremiah 19:11. What is physically different about the two vessels, and what does the potter do differently with each?

INTERPRETATION ■ WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

- 1 If *lev* is the decision making center and not the emotions, how does that change Jeremiah 17:9? What does it say about our confidence in our own self assessment?
- 2 In Jeremiah 18:7 to 10 God says he will relent, in both directions, depending on how a nation responds. How do you hold that together with the fact that God does not change? What is actually changing in that passage?
- 3 The only difference between the reworked pot and the smashed flask was the condition of the clay, not the skill of the potter. What does "hard" look like in a real person's life? Would somebody know it about themselves?
- 4 Jeremiah tells God he was deceived, and then says he cannot stop speaking because the word is a fire in his bones. Both are in Scripture. What does it tell us about God that he preserved the complaint instead of editing it out?

APPLICATION ■ WHAT DO I DO?

- 1 Name the thing in your life that went wrong in your hands while you were working on it, the one you privately filed as ruined. What would it mean to hand that specific thing back to the potter this week rather than either fixing it or abandoning it?

- 2 Jeremiah 9:23 to 24 says not to boast in being smart, strong, or well off. What is the thing you are quietly proud of that could be gone by Friday? What would it look like to hold it more loosely without pretending it doesn't matter to you?
- 3 Jeremiah bought a field he would never farm. What is one concrete, costly thing you could invest in this month whose payoff you may never personally see? Name it out loud.

CROSS REFERENCES

ISAIAH 64:8 The clay's side of the conversation, prayed a century before Jeremiah stood in that shop. You are our Father, we are the clay, you are our potter, we are all the work of your hand.

ROMANS 9:20 TO 21 Paul reaches for the same image and pushes it harder. Jeremiah's potter responds when the clay turns. Paul's potter doesn't owe the clay an explanation. Both are in your Bible.

EZEKIEL 36:26 Written from Babylon while Jeremiah was in Jerusalem. The promise underneath the whole story, that God himself removes the heart of stone and gives a heart of flesh. He is the one who keeps the clay soft.

PERSONAL REFLECTION (SOLO JOURNALING)

- 1 Jeremiah was right for forty years and it never once made anyone listen. Write about a place in your life where you are probably right and it isn't working. What would change if being heard was never your assignment?
- 2 Write the prayer you have not prayed because it's too honest. Jeremiah's version made it into Scripture. Yours doesn't have to make it out of the notebook.
- 3 Are you soft or set right now? Be specific about how you can tell. What is the evidence, in your actual week, either way?

WEEKLY PRACTICE: NAME THE SPOILED POT

This week, do one small thing every day and let the word do the work instead of you.

DAY ONE. Write down, in one sentence, the thing in your life you have privately decided is ruined. One sentence, no explanation, no defense.

DAY TWO. Read Jeremiah 18:1 to 6 out loud, slowly. Then read your one sentence out loud right after it. Don't add anything.

DAY THREE. Ask one question and then be quiet for two minutes: God, is this still on the wheel?

DAY FOUR. Find the place in that situation where you have gone hard, not where somebody else has. Write that down under your sentence.

DAY FIVE. Pray Lamentations 5:21 as it is written. Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored.

DAY SIX. Do one small, concrete thing you would only do if that situation had a future. Buy the field.

Keep the paper. You'll want it in session six.

CLOSING PRAYER PROMPT

As you close, pray about these three things. Out loud if the group is willing.

The control room. Ask God to search the part of you that makes the decisions, and admit out loud that you cannot see into it by yourself.

The spoiled thing. Name it to him plainly, without softening it and without adding your plan for fixing it.

Softness. Ask him for the one thing you cannot manufacture: a heart of flesh instead of stone, and the willingness to stay in his hands while he works.



SESSION TWO

The Two Charcoal Fires

PETER ■ JOHN 18 AND 21 ■ WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 8

OVERVIEW

There's a rare Greek word that shows up exactly twice in the entire New Testament. Both times it means a charcoal fire. Both times Peter is standing next to it. At the first one he says three times that he never knew Jesus. At the second one Jesus is cooking him breakfast. This session walks from one fire to the other, and then hands you the letter Peter wrote decades later to people who were about to be burned alive for the name he once denied.

OPENING QUESTION (5 MINUTES)

Think of a time you found out something about yourself under pressure that you would rather not have known. Not a mistake you planned, something that just came out. Did the pressure create it, or did it reveal it? How sure are you?

SCRIPTURE READING

Read aloud: John 18:15 to 18 and 25 to 27, then John 21:9 to 19.

Reference passages: John 13:1 to 11 (the washing), Luke 22:31 to 34 and 54 to 62 (the sifting and the look), Malachi 3:2 to 3 (the refiner), 1 Peter 1:6 to 7 and 4:12 (the letter).

THE STORY (READ ALOUD, 10 TO 15 MINUTES)

Simon was a commercial fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. John's Gospel says his home town was Bethsaida, on the north shore. Mark tells us there was a house in Capernaum belonging to him and his brother Andrew, and that house became the place Jesus stayed. So this is a working man with a boat, a partnership, a mortgage of some kind, and a mother in law living close enough to get sick in the next room.

Jesus renamed him Peter, which means rock, and he was the loudest of the twelve. He's the one who answers first, who gets out of the boat, who says the thing everybody else is thinking. That's worth holding onto, because everything that happens next happens to a man who genuinely meant it.

Start on the last night, at dinner. Jesus gets up, wraps a towel around himself, kneels down, and starts washing his friends' feet. This is slave work. When he gets to Peter, Peter refuses.

Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me."

JOHN 13:8

And Peter, being Peter, swings straight to the other extreme.

Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!

JOHN 13:9

Jesus tells him no, and the reason he gives has two different Greek verbs in it that English flattens into one.

The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean.

JOHN 13:10

The first verb is *louo*, a full body bath. The second is *nipto*, washing a part, hands or feet or face. In that world you bathed at home and then walked to dinner through the street, so you arrived clean everywhere except your feet. Jesus is saying: you were bathed once, completely. That doesn't happen again. But you're going to keep walking through the street, so your feet need doing every day. Knowing the difference between those two washings is most of the Christian life. Peter is about to need it more than anybody in the room.

Later that same night Jesus tells him what's coming.

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.

LUKE 22:31 TO 32

Read that carefully, because it is not what we usually assume. Jesus does not pray that Peter would be spared the sifting. He prays that Peter's faith would survive it. And then he says *when* you have turned again, not *if*. The restoration is already scheduled before the failure has happened.

Peter hears none of that. He hears a challenge.

Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.

LUKE 22:33

And Jesus tells him the rooster won't crow before he's denied three times that he even knows him.

A few hours later Jesus is arrested. Everybody scatters. But Peter follows, at a distance, all the way into the courtyard of the high priest's house. Give him that. He is the only one who got close enough to fail this badly. And John gives us the detail that makes the whole story work.

Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.

JOHN 18:18

The Greek word for that charcoal fire is *anthrakia*. Hold it. It appears twice in the New Testament and this is the first one.

A servant girl asks if he's one of the disciples. He says no. It happens twice more. And then this.

Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed.

JOHN 18:27

Luke adds the detail that ruins you.

And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

LUKE 22:61 TO 62

Now here's the question this session exists to ask. The fire in that courtyard did not put cowardice into Peter. It was in there. He didn't know it, because nothing in three years of following Jesus had ever gotten hot enough to bring it up. That's what heat does to metal. Silver comes out of the ground mixed with things that aren't silver, and you cannot separate them with a hammer or a wish. You melt it, and the impurities float to the surface where they can be lifted off. The Hebrew word for that floating scum is *sig*, dross, and Proverbs uses it in the plainest possible way.

Take away the dross from the silver, and the smith has material for a vessel.

PROVERBS 25:4

The dross was always in the silver. The fire only made it visible and reachable. And notice what's on the other side of the process. Not a smaller lump of silver. Material for a vessel.

The prophet Malachi puts God himself in the workshop, and he adds one word that changes the temperature of the whole image.

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.

MALACHI 3:2 TO 3

He will *sit*. A refiner cannot walk away from the crucible, because silver held too long or too hot is ruined. He sits with his eyes on it the entire time. The heat is not a sign that God stepped out of the room. The heat is the reason he pulled up a chair.

The refiner sits. He is not going anywhere while you are in the fire.

Now, Jesus dies. Peter is not at the cross in John's account. He is somewhere in the city with the worst three sentences of his life on repeat. Friday, then Saturday, then Sunday morning, when the women get to the tomb and a young man in white gives them a message. Watch the wording.

But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee.

MARK 16:7

And Peter. Two words, added on, because somebody in that group had quietly removed himself from the list and God was not going to let that stand.

Some days later, Peter goes fishing. Seven of them go out, catch nothing all night, and at dawn a man on the shore tells them to throw the net on the other side. The net fills. John says it's the Lord, and Peter, who cannot do anything at half speed, throws himself into the water and swims for it.

And here is what is waiting on the beach.

When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread.

JOHN 21:9

Anthrakia. The second one. The only other time that word appears in the New Testament. Jesus built the same kind of fire, on purpose, and cooked breakfast over it.

Then, after they eat, he asks Peter one question. Three times.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs."

JOHN 21:15

A second time, tend my sheep. A third time, and the text says Peter was grieved because he asked a third time, feed my sheep. Three denials at a charcoal fire. Three questions at a charcoal fire. Jesus did not pretend the first fire never happened. He walked Peter back through it, one denial at a time, in the same smell, and gave him a job at the end of each answer.

That's what restoration looks like in the Bible. Not amnesia. Not a speech about how it wasn't that bad. He takes you back to the exact place, and he gives you work.

Now jump forward thirty years or so. Peter is an old man writing a letter to Christians scattered across what is now Turkey, people who are losing homes and jobs and, some of them, their lives. And the man who folded at a servant girl's question writes this to people facing an empire.

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith ... may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

1 PETER 1:6 TO 7, WITH THE MIDDLE CLAUSE SET ASIDE FOR A MOMENT

The middle clause he leaves out of that sentence is the metal again: *more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire*. Gold goes into the fire and gold comes out, but gold is still going to perish eventually. Your faith goes into the fire and what comes out lasts.

The phrase translated *tested genuineness* is one Greek word, *dokimion*, and it appears in only two places in the entire New Testament. Here, and in James. It doesn't mean the test itself. It means the proven quality that the test brings out, the hallmark stamped on the metal once the assayer is satisfied. Which means the fire is not an examination you might fail. It's the process that produces the stamp.

And then, later in the same letter, Peter says the thing that only he could say.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

1 PETER 4:12

Don't be surprised by the fire. That's advice from a man who was surprised by his, and whose faith did not survive the night on its own strength. It survived because somebody had already prayed for it, and had already scheduled the beach.

Heat does not put the ugly in you. It brings up what was already there so it can be lifted off. And the one holding the crucible already knows what he is going to make out of you.

WORD STUDY SPOTLIGHT

άνθρακιά **anthrakia** (*an-thrah-kee-AH*)

STRONG'S G439

MEANING A heap of burning charcoal. A coal fire.

APPEARS 2 times in the New Testament: John 18:18 and John 21:9

KEY VERSE They saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. (John 21:9)

Two occurrences in the whole New Testament, and both of them have Peter standing beside them. John is a careful writer and he had other words available for fire. He chose this one twice on purpose. Smell is the sense most wired to memory, and charcoal smoke on a cold morning would have taken Peter straight back. Jesus did not avoid the trigger. He rebuilt it and put breakfast on it.

λούω **louo** (*LOO-oh*)

STRONG'S G3068

MEANING To bathe the whole body, as opposed to washing one part.

APPEARS 5 times in the New Testament

KEY VERSE The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet. (John 13:10)

The verse holds two verbs. *Louo* is the bath; *nipto* is the rinse. The bath happened once and is not repeated. The rinse happens daily because you keep walking through the world. Most Christian guilt lives in the gap between those two words, in re confessing something that was settled at the bath. Peter needed his feet washed. He did not need bathing again.

סיג **sig** (*seeg*)

STRONG'S H5509

MEANING Dross. The waste that rises to the surface of molten silver.

APPEARS about 8 to 9 times

KEY VERSE Take away the dross from the silver, and the smith has material for a vessel. (Proverbs 25:4)

Dross is not added by the fire. It comes out of the ground already inside the ore. Everything this word touches in the Old Testament assumes that the impurity is original and the heat is diagnostic. If you have ever said "that isn't like me" about something you did under pressure, this word is the Bible's gentle, unwelcome correction.

צָרַף **tsaraph** (*tsah-RAF*)

STRONG'S H6884

MEANING To smelt or refine metal. To purify by melting. Also to test.

APPEARS about 33 to 34 times

KEY VERSE He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver. (Malachi 3:3)

The participle form of this verb is the noun for a metalworker, so Malachi is not comparing God to a refiner in passing. He is giving God the job title. And then he sits him down. In an ancient shop the refiner never left the crucible, because a few seconds too long ruins the batch. Patience here is not distance. It is the exact opposite.

δοκιμάζω **dokimazo** (*dok-ee-MAD-zo*)

STRONG'S G1381

MEANING To test something in order to prove it genuine, and then to approve it.

APPEARS about 22 to 23 times in the New Testament

KEY VERSE Though it is tested by fire. (1 Peter 1:7)

Greek had a separate word for testing designed to break something, *peirazo*. This is not that word. *Dokimazo* is what an assayer does to metal he expects to be good, and approval is built into the meaning. When Scripture says God tests you, this is usually the verb. He is not running an audit hoping to catch you. He is proving something out so it can be trusted.

δοκίμιον **dokimion** (*dok-EE-mee-on*)

STRONG'S G1383

MEANING The proven genuineness of a thing. What is left once it has been tested.

APPEARS 2 times in the New Testament: 1 Peter 1:7 and James 1:3

KEY VERSE The tested genuineness of your faith. (1 Peter 1:7)

This is the payoff word of the session. It doesn't name the ordeal, it names the result: the hallmark, the assayer's stamp, the quality that is now verified. Which means the honest question in a hard season is not "will I pass" but "what is he proving out." What comes out of the fire is not a smaller version of you. It is the part that was actually real.

MEANING A burning. A smelting. By extension, a fiery ordeal.

APPEARS 3 times in the New Testament: 1 Peter 4:12 and twice in Revelation 18

KEY VERSE Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you. (1 Peter 4:12)

Peter does not call it a hardship or a difficulty. He calls it a smelting, which is the same industrial process the Old Testament refining words describe. It is the strongest available word and he does not soften it. He softens the surprise instead. The fire is not evidence that something has gone wrong with your Christianity. It is the normal working condition of the metal.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (20 TO 25 MINUTES)

OBSERVATION ■ WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

- 1 In Luke 22:31 to 32, what exactly does Jesus pray for Peter, and what does he not pray for? What word does he use, *if* or *when*, about the turning back?
- 2 Compare John 18:18 with John 21:9. What is the same in both scenes? Who is standing there, and what is burning?
- 3 In Mark 16:7, who is singled out by name in the message from the tomb? Why would that be worth including?

INTERPRETATION ■ WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

- 1 If dross was already in the silver, what does that say about where our worst moments come from? Is that a harder or an easier thing to believe about yourself than the alternative?
- 2 Malachi says the refiner sits. What does that image do to the common feeling that God has gone quiet during a hard season?
- 3 Jesus asked Peter the same question three times in the same setting as the three denials. Why do that rather than simply telling him he was forgiven?
- 4 The bath and the daily foot washing are two different words in John 13:10. Where do you see people, including yourself, treating a settled thing as though it needs redoing?

APPLICATION ■ WHAT DO I DO?

- 1 What did the last hot season in your life bring to the surface? Name one specific thing, not a category. Has it actually been lifted off, or is it still floating there?
- 2 Peter's restoration ended in a job assignment, not just an apology accepted. What work might God be handing you on the far side of your failure, precisely because of it?

- 3 Is there something you keep re confessing that was dealt with at the bath? Say it out loud once, in past tense, and then leave it there.

CROSS REFERENCES

JOB 23:10 Spoken from the middle of the worst suffering in the Old Testament. He knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold. The confidence is not in the process. It is in the one running it.

ISAIAH 48:10 I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. God names the furnace honestly and puts himself in it as the one doing the refining, not as a spectator.

JAMES 1:2 TO 3 The only other place *dokimion* appears. James, the brother of Jesus, uses the identical word and lands it on steadfastness, which is where session three picks the thread back up.

PERSONAL REFLECTION (SOLO JOURNALING)

- 1 Write about what you said or did when you were scared and nobody important was watching. Not to punish yourself. To see it, the way Peter finally had to.
- 2 What do you assume Jesus' face looks like when you fail? Now go read Luke 22:61 and John 21:9 back to back and write what the text actually shows you.
- 3 If God is proving something out in you right now rather than grading you, what might it be? Write your honest guess, then hold it loosely.

WEEKLY PRACTICE: SIT AT THE SECOND FIRE

Peter did not get past the first fire by avoiding fire. He got past it at a second one. Take the week slowly.

DAY ONE. Write down the moment you would least like asked about three times. Fold the paper.

DAY TWO. Read John 18:15 to 18 and 25 to 27 out loud. Notice how little the text scolds him. It just reports it.

DAY THREE. Read John 21:9 to 17 out loud. Read it a second time, slower, and picture the smell.

DAY FOUR. Answer his question out loud, in your own words, three times. Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

DAY FIVE. Ask what the job is. Feed my sheep was specific. Ask for something specific, then write down the first ordinary thing that comes to mind.

DAY SIX. Do that thing for one person. Small is fine. Small is the point.

CLOSING PRAYER PROMPT

As you close, pray about these three things.

What the heat brought up. Name it to God plainly rather than explaining it away as unlike you.

The refiner who sits. Thank him that the fire is proof he is close, not proof he left.

The assignment. Ask him for the work on the other side, and for the nerve to take it from the same hands you failed.



SESSION THREE

One More Year

THE VINEYARD ■ ISAIAH 5 TO JOHN 15 ■ WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 15

OVERVIEW

This is one story told across seven hundred years by three different voices. It starts as a love song about a man who built a vineyard and got nothing out of it. It gets retold by Jesus in a temple courtyard with the religious leaders standing right there. And it ends on the last night of his life, walking to a garden, when he turns the whole image inside out and says something nobody saw coming: he is the vine, and the branches that get cut are the ones that are working.

OPENING QUESTION (5 MINUTES)

Think of a time somebody stopped correcting you. A coach, a parent, a boss, a friend who used to tell you the truth and then just went quiet and pleasant. What did that feel like at the time? What did it turn out to mean?

SCRIPTURE READING

Read aloud: Isaiah 5:1 to 7, then John 15:1 to 11.

Reference passages: Matthew 21:33 to 43 (the tenants), Luke 13:6 to 9 (the fig tree), Jeremiah 17:7 to 8 (the tree by water), James 1:2 to 4 (finished).

THE STORY (READ ALOUD, 10 TO 15 MINUTES)

About seven hundred years before Jesus, a prophet named Isaiah stood up in front of a crowd in Jerusalem and started singing. That's the part we usually miss. It isn't a sermon. It opens like a love song about somebody's beloved, and everyone leans in expecting a wedding.

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

ISAIAH 5:1 TO 2

Count what the man did. He picked the best ground. He dug it, which in that country means moving rock by hand for weeks. He cleared the stones out. He didn't plant cheap stock, he planted choice vines. He built a stone watchtower, which is what you build when you expect a harvest worth guarding. And he cut a winepress into the bedrock, which is what you build when you are certain. Every one of those is an act of expense done in advance, on faith.

And it gave him wild grapes. Sour, useless, the kind of fruit a vine gives when nobody is tending it, except somebody was.

Then the singer turns to the crowd and asks them to be the judge.

What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

ISAIAH 5:4

And then comes the sentence this whole session hangs on. The judgment. Listen for what the punishment actually is.

And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up.

ISAIAH 5:5 TO 6

It shall not be pruned.

Sit on that line, because our instincts have it backwards. We assume the knife is the judgment. Isaiah says the knife going away is. God's sentence on a vineyard he is finished with is that nobody is coming to cut it anymore. It gets left alone. It gets to grow in every direction it wants, and it turns into briers.

The Hebrew verb for prune here is *zamar*, and it shows up only three times in the entire Old Testament. Twice in Leviticus, in the law about the sabbath year, where God tells the people that for six years you prune your vineyard and in the seventh you don't. And once here, where not pruning is no longer a rest. It's abandonment.

Then Isaiah drops the mask.

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

ISAIAH 5:7

In Hebrew that last line is a pair of puns that land like a slap. The word for justice is *mishpat* and the word for bloodshed is *mispach*. The word for righteousness is *tsedaqah* and the word for an outcry is *tse'aqah*. He expected one and got something that sounds almost exactly like it and is nothing like it at all. That is the most uncomfortable description of religious life ever written in two words.

Now jump seven hundred years. Jesus is in the temple courts during the last week of his life, and the chief priests and elders are standing in front of him. And he starts telling a story that every single person there recognizes from childhood.

There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country.

MATTHEW 21:33

Same hill. Same fence, same winepress, same tower. He is quoting Isaiah's song back to the men who taught it. But he changes the ending. In his version the owner sends servants to collect the fruit and the tenants beat them and kill them. So he sends his son.

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance." And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

MATTHEW 21:38 TO 39

He is standing in front of the men who will do that inside of a week, telling them how it goes. And Matthew notes that they knew he was talking about them.

There is a smaller version of the same story that he tells somewhere else, and it's the one that gives this session its name.

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, "Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?"

LUKE 13:6 TO 7

Three years of nothing. Any farmer in the room would agree with the owner. And then the gardener speaks up.

Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.

LUKE 13:8 TO 9

One more year. And notice he doesn't ask for the tree to be excused. He asks for time, and he volunteers to do the work himself. Digging around a fig tree and hauling manure to it is the least dignified job on the property. The gardener asks for a reprieve and then names the price of it, and the price is his own labor in the dirt. If you have ever been given a year you had no argument for, somebody was down there with a shovel.

Now the last night. Jesus and eleven men are walking through Jerusalem after dinner, past vines that grew all over that city, headed for a garden where he will be arrested in a few hours. And he says this.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

JOHN 15:1 TO 2

Stop on the word *true*. For seven centuries Israel had been the vineyard, and the vineyard had failed. Jesus says: I am the vine that doesn't. Everything Isaiah looked for and didn't find, look at me.

And then he says the hard thing. There are two kinds of branches on this vine and both of them get the knife. The fruitless branch is taken away. The fruitful branch is pruned. Nobody on that vine is left alone.

The Greek verb for prunes there is *kathairo*, and it appears in exactly one place in the New Testament, right here. It's a farming word for cutting a vine back, and it's built off the ordinary Greek word for clean, *katharos*. Which is why the very next sentence out of his mouth is the one people miss.

Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

JOHN 15:3

Already *katharos*. He prunes with the same root word he uses to tell them they are already clean. The cutting is not how they become acceptable. They already are. The cutting is what he does to people who already belong to him.

And here's what a vinedresser actually does, because most of us have never watched one. He is not removing dead wood. Dead wood is easy and it isn't the job. He walks the row cutting healthy, living, green growth, canes that would happily produce leaves all summer, because a vine only has so much to give and it will spend everything it has on foliage if you let it. The pruning decides where the strength goes. Every cut is the vinedresser choosing fruit over leaves on that plant's behalf.

Pruning happens to the branches that are working. The cut is not a verdict on you. It is a vote of confidence in you.

Which means the honest and painful question in a season of loss is not always "what did I do wrong." Sometimes something in your life was genuinely good, genuinely alive, genuinely yours, and it was still cut, because the one holding the knife wanted more from you than leaves.

Then Jesus tells them how any of this is survivable, and it is one word repeated over and over.

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

JOHN 15:4

The verb is *meno*, and it means to stay, to remain, to not leave. He uses it about ten times in this short passage. Notice he does not tell the branch to produce. He never once says try harder, grow faster, be more fruitful. He tells it to stay attached. Fruit is not an achievement a branch pulls off. Fruit is what happens to a branch that doesn't detach.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

JOHN 15:5

You are not the vine. You were never supposed to be. A branch that decides to be its own source dies of the effort, and it usually looks impressive for a season first.

Jeremiah had already drawn the same picture, six hundred years earlier, about a tree with its roots in the water that doesn't panic when the heat comes and doesn't stop bearing in a drought. The tree isn't stronger than the drought. It's just closer to the stream.

And when Paul finally lists what grows on a person attached to God, he does something in Greek that English hides. He writes *the fruit of the Spirit is*, singular, and then names nine things. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. Not nine fruits you collect. One fruit with nine sides, the way an orange has segments. You do not get to be a patient person and skip kind. It comes as one thing, off one vine.

Last piece. James, the brother of Jesus, writes to people under pressure and uses a word that ties this whole session to the last one.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

JAMES 1:2 TO 4

That word *perfect* is *teleios*, and it does not mean flawless. It means finished, mature, having arrived at what it was for. An apple is *teleios* when it is ripe, not when it is unblemished. So the goal God is cutting toward is not a version of you with no scars. It's a version of you that is actually ready.

And the writer of Hebrews says the quiet part out loud, for anybody in the middle of it: for the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Later. Not now. He does not pretend it feels like anything other than what it is.

The worst thing God can do to a vineyard is stop pruning it. If the knife is in your life this year, you have not been abandoned. You have been chosen for fruit.

WORD STUDY SPOTLIGHT

זָמַר **zamar** (*zah-MAR*)

STRONG'S H2168

MEANING To prune or trim a vine, cutting growth back so it bears better.

APPEARS 3 times: Leviticus 25:3, Leviticus 25:4, Isaiah 5:6

KEY VERSE I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed. (Isaiah 5:6)

Three occurrences, and they tell the whole story between them. In Leviticus, not pruning is a sabbath, a year of rest God commands. In Isaiah, not pruning is a sentence. The same action means gift or abandonment depending entirely on whether the owner is coming back. Nothing in your circumstances tells you which one you are in. Only the owner does.

ἀμπέλος **ampelos** (*AM-pel-os*)

STRONG'S G288

MEANING A grapevine. The main stock that everything else grows out of.

APPEARS about 9 times in the New Testament

KEY VERSE I am the vine; you are the branches. (John 15:5)

A vine is not a bundle of equal parts. There is one stock, rooted, and everything green is an extension of it borrowing life it did not generate. When Jesus calls himself the *true* vine, he is answering seven hundred years of Israel being called the vine and failing at it. The identity everybody had been trying to live up to turns out to be his, and the job description he hands you is much smaller and much better: be attached.

καθαίρω **kathairo** (*kath-AH-ee-ro*)

STRONG'S G2508

MEANING To prune a vine. To cleanse by cutting away.

APPEARS 1 time in the New Testament: John 15:2

KEY VERSE Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. (John 15:2)

One occurrence in the whole New Testament, and it is built from *katharos*, the ordinary word for clean, which Jesus then uses in the very next verse to tell them they already are. Pruning and cleansing are the same root because in a vineyard they are the same act. He is not cutting to make you acceptable. He is cutting because you already are, and he wants more from you than green.

μένω **meno** (MEH-no)

STRONG'S G3306

MEANING To stay, to remain, to abide. To not leave.

APPEARS about 118 to 120 times in the New Testament

KEY VERSE Abide in me, and I in you. (John 15:4)

Of all the verbs available for a farewell speech, this is the one Jesus repeats. It is not a striving word. It is the opposite of a striving word. A branch abides by not doing the one thing that would kill it, which is detaching. Every instruction in the passage about fruit is really an instruction about staying, and that is the most freeing sentence in this session.

פְּרִי **peri** (peh-REE)

STRONG'S H6529

MEANING Fruit or produce. Literally crops, and figuratively results, offspring, consequence.

APPEARS 119 times in the Hebrew Bible

KEY VERSE Its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit. (Jeremiah 17:8)

Hebrew uses one word for what a tree produces and for what a life produces, which is why the Old Testament can talk about the fruit of your deeds without changing metaphors. Jeremiah's picture is the honest one: the tree by the water is not immune to the drought. The heat still comes and the year is still dry. It just has its roots somewhere the weather cannot reach.

καρπός **karpos** (kar-POS)

STRONG'S G2590

MEANING Fruit. What a living thing produces because of what it is.

APPEARS 66 times in the New Testament

KEY VERSE By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. (John 15:8)

In Galatians 5:22 Paul writes this word in the singular with a singular verb, then lists nine qualities. The grammar is deliberate, and it is the opposite of a checklist. Right before it he lists the works of the flesh, plural, because sin fragments a person into unrelated appetites. The Spirit grows one thing. You cannot order the patience without the kindness.

MEANING Complete, mature, full grown. Having reached what it was made for.

APPEARS 19 times in the New Testament

KEY VERSE Let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:4)

It comes from *telos*, meaning the end or the goal, so the word is about arrival, not flawlessness. Fruit is *teleios* when it is ripe. This is the word that keeps the whole month from turning into shame: God is not cutting toward a version of you with no marks on it. He is cutting toward a version of you that is finally ready for what he made you for.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (20 TO 25 MINUTES)

OBSERVATION ■ WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

- 1 In Isaiah 5:1 to 2, list every single thing the owner did for the vineyard before he expected anything from it. How many actions is that?
- 2 In Isaiah 5:5 to 6, what exactly is the judgment? Name each piece, and say which one surprises you.
- 3 In John 15:2, what happens to the branch that bears no fruit, and what happens to the branch that does? What does John 15:3 say about the people he is speaking to?

INTERPRETATION ■ WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

- 1 If not being pruned is the judgment in Isaiah 5, what does that suggest about seasons when God seems to have no complaints about you? How would you tell the difference between peace and abandonment?
- 2 The gardener in Luke 13 asks for one more year and offers to do the digging himself. What does that tell you about how mercy actually works in the Bible? Who pays for it?
- 3 *Kathairo* and *katharos* are the same root. Why does Jesus tell them they are already clean in the middle of a passage about being cut?
- 4 Paul writes fruit as one singular thing with nine qualities. What goes wrong in a Christian life when we treat that list as nine separate projects?

APPLICATION ■ WHAT DO I DO?

- 1 Name a loss in the last two years that came out of a part of your life that was genuinely working. Sit with the possibility that it was a cut, not a punishment. What would change if that were true?
- 2 Where are you trying to be the vine? Point at the specific area where you are running on your own supply and calling it faithfulness.
- 3 Abiding is not a feeling, it is a set of ordinary repeated actions. What is one concrete thing you will do this week that keeps you attached, and when exactly will you do it?

CROSS REFERENCES

PSALM 1:3 The same picture as Jeremiah 17. A tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season. Note the last two words. Fruit comes on the tree's season, not on your schedule.

HEBREWS 12:11 The most honest verse about pruning in the New Testament. All discipline seems painful rather than pleasant at the time. It does not tell you to enjoy it. It tells you what it yields later.

JOHN 15:16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide. The choosing came first, and the fruit is meant to outlast you.

PERSONAL REFLECTION (SOLO JOURNALING)

- 1** Write about a thing God stopped correcting you about. Be honest about whether that felt like grace at the time and what you think now.
- 2** What fruit do other people see on you that you cannot see yourself? Ask one person this week, then write down what they say without arguing with it.
- 3** You have been given a year you did not earn. Describe it. What is the digging and the manure that somebody else has been doing for you around the roots?

WEEKLY PRACTICE: NAME THE CUT

This week, stop trying to grow and practice staying.

DAY ONE. Write down one thing that was cut from your life in the last two years that you have never called anything but a loss.

DAY TWO. Read John 15:1 to 5 out loud. Ask one question: was that leaves or fruit? Write your answer even if you are not sure.

DAY THREE. Find the place you are being your own vine. Write the sentence you tell yourself that keeps you there.

DAY FOUR. Do nothing productive for God for fifteen minutes. Sit, read John 15 again, and let abiding be the only item on the list.

DAY FIVE. Ask somebody who knows you what they see growing on you lately. Write it down exactly as they say it.

DAY SIX. Thank God for one specific cut. Out loud, by name. This is the hardest day of the week and it is the whole point.

CLOSING PRAYER PROMPT

As you close, pray about these three things.

The knife. Thank God that he has not left your vineyard alone, and ask for the grace to read correction as care rather than rejection.

The place you are being the vine. Confess it plainly and ask to be a branch again.

Ripeness over flawlessness. Ask him to finish what he started in you rather than to make you look finished.



SESSION FOUR

The Road to Damascus

PAUL ■ ACTS 9 AND ROMANS 12 ■ WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 22

OVERVIEW

The man who wrote the most famous sentence in the Bible about being transformed by the renewal of your mind is the man whose mind got knocked flat on a road he had no business being on. This session tells that story from the beginning, including the part before it that we usually skip, and then follows him into the long quiet years afterward, because the flash of light took about a minute and the renewing took the rest of his life.

OPENING QUESTION (5 MINUTES)

Think of something you were once completely certain about and later found out you had wrong. Not a small thing. Something you would have argued for. What did it take to change your mind, and how long did the change actually take to finish?

SCRIPTURE READING

Read aloud: Acts 9:1 to 19, then Romans 12:1 to 2.

Reference passages: Acts 7:58 to 8:3 (before the road), Acts 26:12 to 20 (Paul tells it himself), 2 Corinthians 4:16 (day by day), 1 Corinthians 15:9 to 10 (what he became).

THE STORY (READ ALOUD, 10 TO 15 MINUTES)

Before he was Paul he was Saul, and before the road he was in a crowd watching a man die. That's where Luke, the doctor who wrote down everything he could find out about the early church, first puts him in the story. A man named Stephen has been dragged outside Jerusalem for preaching about Jesus, and a mob is throwing stones at him until he dies. And there is a coat check.

Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

ACTS 7:58

That is the first time this man appears in the Bible. He is holding the coats so the men doing the killing can throw harder. And Luke does not leave any room to soften it.

And Saul approved of his execution.

ACTS 8:1

But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

ACTS 8:3

House after house. Men and women. Understand who is doing this. He tells us himself later that he was a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, brought up in Jerusalem and educated at the feet of Gamaliel, who was the most respected teacher of the law in that generation. This is not a thug. This is a brilliant young man at the top of his field, doing what he sincerely believes God wants, with the full backing of the institution he serves. That's the part that should unsettle you. Sincerity and education and religious credentials were exactly the equipment he was using to do harm.

And he is not finished. He wants the ones who got away.

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

ACTS 9:1 TO 2

Damascus is roughly a hundred and thirty five miles from Jerusalem, about a six day walk. He asks for the paperwork and starts walking. Six days is a long time to think about what you are going to do when you arrive.

And then, in sight of the city.

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

ACTS 9:3 TO 4

Sit on the pronoun. Not *why are you persecuting my people*. Why are you persecuting *me*. Jesus counts what was done to those men and women dragged out of their houses as done to himself. Saul asks the only question available to him.

And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

ACTS 9:5 TO 6

Years later, telling the story to a king, Paul adds a line Jesus said in that moment: it is hard for you to kick against the goads. A goad is a sharpened stick a farmer uses behind an ox. Kicking at it only drives it in. Which means Jesus is telling him that something in him had already been resisting for a while, and it was costing him.

Then the man who came to arrest gets led into town by the hand.

Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

ACTS 9:8 TO 9

Three days in the dark in a house on a street called Straight, with no food and no water and nothing to do but go back through everything he had ever been sure of.

Meanwhile God speaks to a Christian in that city named Ananias and tells him where to go. And Ananias, to his everlasting credit, argues.

Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.

ACTS 9:13 TO 14

That is a reasonable objection from a man being asked to walk into the house of somebody sent to arrest him. God's answer is not a reassurance about safety. It's a job description.

Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

ACTS 9:15 TO 16

So Ananias goes. And the first word out of his mouth, to the man who came to town with a warrant for his arrest, is this.

So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

ACTS 9:17

Brother Saul. There is no sermon in this session better than those two words in that room.

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened.

ACTS 9:18 TO 19

The Greek word for scales is *lepis*, a scale of a fish or a flake of metal, and it is the kind of specific physical vocabulary that ancient Greek medical writers used for this exact condition. Luke was a physician, and you can feel it. He does not say a miracle occurred. He tells you what it looked like from the doorway.

The light that blinded him is the light that let him see. Sometimes the first thing God does to a person's sight is take it, because a man that certain cannot be corrected. He can only be stopped.

Your mind will not be renewed by trying harder with the old one. That was the instrument that got you here.

Now here is the part almost nobody tells, and it is the reason this session exists.

Nothing happens fast after that. Paul says in his own letter to the Galatians that he did not immediately go up to Jerusalem to meet the apostles. He went away into Arabia, then came back to Damascus, and only *after three years* went up to Jerusalem to meet Peter, and stayed fifteen days. Then Luke tells us that at some later point Barnabas had to travel to Tarsus to look for him, found him, and brought him to Antioch, where they taught together for a whole year.

Go back over that slowly. There is a period after the brightest conversion in history where the most important thing recorded about the apostle Paul is that a friend had to go find him because nobody knew quite what to do with him. Scripture does not tell us how long that stretch lasted, and we should not pretend it does. What it tells us is that it existed. The road took a minute. The rest took years, in Arabia and in his own hometown, with no audience and no verse written yet.

And when he finally does write the sentence everybody quotes, he writes it as somebody who lived through that stretch.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

ROMANS 12:2

There are two verbs in that verse and they are pulling in opposite directions. The first, *syschematizo*, means to be pressed into an outside pattern, the way a mold shapes something from the surface in. The second, *metamorphoo*, means a change of form that works from the inside out. It is the word English borrows for metamorphosis. And both verbs are commands in the passive: don't let the world press you into its shape, do let God change you from the inside.

Both are also in the present tense, which in Greek means ongoing and unfinished. Not *be transformed* as a single event you can date. Keep on being transformed. He wrote it that way on purpose, because that is exactly how it went for him.

The instrument being renewed is the *nous*, the mind, the reasoning and evaluating faculty. Which puts us right back at the beginning of the month. Jeremiah said the problem is the *lev*, the control room where you decide. Paul says the renewal happens in the *nous*, the faculty you think with. Two languages, six hundred years apart, pointing at the same room in the same house.

And he says elsewhere how it happens, which is the least dramatic sentence about spiritual growth in the New Testament.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:16

Day by day. That is not the consolation prize for people who did not get a Damascus road. That is the method. The road was the interruption. The renewing is the work, and it happens in installments so small you cannot feel them, which is why you need somebody to tell you it is happening at all.

Here is what makes the whole thing believable. God did not delete Saul and install somebody else. Look at the man before: relentless, brilliant, argumentative, willing to travel a hundred and thirty five miles for something he believed, willing to suffer for it, absolutely incapable of leaving a thing alone. Now look at the man after. Every one of those traits is still there, pointed the other way. He is still relentless. He still argues. He still travels. He still suffers for it. He even writes, about the people he used to arrest, that he could wish himself cut off from Christ if it would save them, which is the same terrifying intensity that once held the coats.

He knew it, too.

For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:9 TO 10

By the grace of God I am what I am. Not *I am somebody else now*. He is still recognizably himself. The material was kept and the direction was changed, which is exactly what the potter did with the clay in session one.

And at the very end of his longest chapter, thinking about the last change of all, he reaches for one more word.

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:51 TO 52

The verb is *allasso*, to exchange one thing for another. That change is instant. The one you are living in right now is not, and the slowness of it is not a sign that it isn't real.

God does not swap you out for somebody else. He transforms the person you already are, and the day by day is not the consolation prize. It is the method.

WORD STUDY SPOTLIGHT

μετανοέω **metanoeo** (*met-an-o-EH-oh*)

STRONG'S G3340

MEANING To change your mind, and so to turn from sin toward God. To repent.

APPEARS 34 times in the New Testament

KEY VERSE That they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. (Acts 26:20)

Built from *meta*, after or change, and *noeo*, to think. Repentance in Greek is not primarily an emotion, it is a reversal of thinking that turns the body around. Which is why Paul, describing his own life's message to a king, puts repentance and the deeds that follow it in the same breath. Feeling bad about something and never moving is not this word.

νοῦς **nous** (*nooce*)

STRONG'S G3563

MEANING The mind. The faculty of understanding, reasoning, and moral judgment.

APPEARS 24 times in the New Testament

KEY VERSE Be transformed by the renewal of your mind. (Romans 12:2)

This is the Greek counterpart to Hebrew *lev* from session one. Not your intelligence and not your opinions, but the equipment you evaluate with. Paul locates the renewal exactly where Jeremiah located the problem. And he does not say inform your mind or discipline your mind. He says have it renewed, passive, by somebody else, because the instrument cannot repair itself.

συσχηματίζω **syschematizo** (soos-khay-mat-ID-zo)

STRONG'S G4964

MEANING To be shaped by an outside pattern. To be pressed into a mold.

APPEARS 2 times in the New Testament: Romans 12:2 and 1 Peter 1:14

KEY VERSE Do not be conformed to this world. (Romans 12:2)

The root is *schema*, the outward shape of a thing. This is surface conformity, pressure applied from outside, and it works without your permission if you stand still long enough. Paul sets it directly against *metamorphoo*, which changes the inner form. One is a mold. The other is a life. You are getting one of the two whether you choose or not.

μεταμορφώω **metamorphoo** (met-am-or-FO-oh)

STRONG'S G3339

MEANING To be transformed. To change form from the inside out.

APPEARS 4 times: Matthew 17:2, Mark 9:2, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 3:18

KEY VERSE But be transformed by the renewal of your mind. (Romans 12:2)

Four occurrences, and two of them are the Transfiguration, where the word describes what happened to the face of Jesus on a mountain. The other two are about you. That is not a small thing to notice. The New Testament uses the same verb for what happened to him in front of three terrified disciples and for what is happening to ordinary people slowly, and session five puts those two on the same page.

φωτίζω **photizo** (fo-TID-zo)

STRONG'S G5461

MEANING To shed light on something. To enlighten, to bring into view.

APPEARS 11 times in the New Testament

KEY VERSE Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you. (Ephesians 1:18)

This is a light word from the man who was blinded by one. Notice what he prays for other people: not more information, but light on what they already have. Paul had all the facts about God before Damascus and could not see a single one of them properly. Enlightenment in the Bible is rarely new data. It is the lamp coming on in a room you were already standing in.

ἀνακαινῶ **anakainoo** (*an-ak-ahee-NO-oh*)

STRONG'S G341

MEANING To renew. To make new again, on the inside.

APPEARS 2 times: 2 Corinthians 4:16 and Colossians 3:10. The noun form appears in Romans 12:2 and Titus 3:5.

KEY VERSE Our inner self is being renewed day by day. (2 Corinthians 4:16)

Both times Paul uses this verb it is in the present tense and the passive voice, describing something in progress and being done to you. He never once uses it to describe a completed event. If you are waiting to feel finished before you believe the renewal is real, this word says the waiting is the wrong test. Unfinished is what it looks like while it is working.

ἀλλάσσω **allasso** (*al-LAS-so*)

STRONG'S G236

MEANING To change or exchange one thing for another.

APPEARS 6 times in the New Testament

KEY VERSE We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. (1 Corinthians 15:51)

This is a different kind of change than *metamorphoo*. Not a slow reshaping, an exchange, and Paul says it happens in the twinkling of an eye. Holding both words together is the honest Christian position: one change is instant and still ahead of you, and the other is agonizingly slow and happening right now. The slow one is the down payment on the fast one.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (20 TO 25 MINUTES)

OBSERVATION ■ WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

- 1 In Acts 7:58 to 8:3, what exactly is Saul doing, and what does Luke say about his opinion of it? What was his training and standing, according to Acts 22:3?
- 2 In Acts 9:4, whom does Jesus say Saul is persecuting? What does that pronoun do to the story?
- 3 In Acts 9:13 to 17, what does Ananias say back to God, what does God say in reply, and what is the first word Ananias speaks to Saul?

INTERPRETATION ■ WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

- 1 Saul was sincere, educated, and religious, and he was doing harm. What does that suggest about the reliability of sincerity as a guide? What does it take to correct a person that certain?
- 2 Romans 12:2 sets two verbs against each other, one working from the outside in and one from the inside out. Where do you see the outside in version operating in ordinary life, and how would you know it was happening to you?

- 3 Both verbs in Romans 12:2 are passive commands. How do you obey a command to have something done to you? What is your part?
- 4 The New Testament records years in which nothing notable happens to Paul, and a friend has to go find him. Why would God spend a converted genius that way? What might have been happening?

APPLICATION ■ WHAT DO I DO?

- 1 What part of your personality have you assumed God wants deleted? Consider that it might be the raw material instead. What would it look like pointed the other way?
- 2 Name the boring stretch you are in, or were in. What was actually being built there that you could not see at the time?
- 3 Renewal happens day by day, which means it needs a daily place to happen. What specifically will fill that place this week, and at what time of day?

CROSS REFERENCES

COLOSSIANS 3:9 TO 10 The other place *anakainoo* appears. The new self is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Renewal has a direction, and the direction is a person.

TITUS 3:5 He saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy. The renewal is grace from the first move, which is why session one insisted grace comes before change.

ROMANS 9:3 Paul says he could wish himself accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of his own people. The same ferocity that held the coats at Stephen's execution, aimed the opposite way. Nothing was thrown out.

PERSONAL REFLECTION (SOLO JOURNALING)

- 1 Write about the day the floor went out from under something you were sure of. What did you lose, and what could you finally see afterward that you could not see before?
- 2 Is there an Ananias in your life, somebody who called you brother or sister before you had earned it? Write their name and what it cost them.
- 3 Where are you measuring your growth by the twinkling of an eye instead of day by day? Write out what day by day progress would honestly look like for you over the next year.

WEEKLY PRACTICE: RENEW ONE ROOM

The mind is renewed daily, not annually. Pick a fixed time and keep it for six days.

DAY ONE. Write down one belief about yourself that you suspect is not true but act on anyway.

DAY TWO. Find one place in Scripture that speaks directly to it. Write the verse out longhand.

DAY THREE. Read it out loud in the morning and again at night. That is the whole assignment.

DAY FOUR. Catch yourself acting on the old belief once during the day. Just notice it, do not lecture yourself. Write down the time it happened.

DAY FIVE. Read the verse again and ask one question: what would today look like if this were the thing I actually believed?

DAY SIX. Do one thing that only makes sense if it is true.

Six days will not finish this. That is the point of the word *day by day*.

CLOSING PRAYER PROMPT

As you close, pray about these three things.

Certainty. Ask God to show you where you are sincerely wrong, and mean it, because that is a dangerous prayer and the right one.

The trait you want deleted. Offer it to him as material instead, and ask him to turn it around rather than take it away.

The slow years. Ask for patience with a work you cannot feel, and thank him that unfinished is not the same as stalled.



SESSION FIVE

The Shining Face

MOSES ■ EXODUS 34 AND 2 CORINTHIANS 3 ■ WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 29

OVERVIEW

An eighty year old shepherd asks God for the one thing nobody has ever been allowed to have. He gets a version of it, hidden in a crack in a rock with a hand over his face, and he comes down the mountain glowing so brightly that people are afraid of him. He has no idea. Fourteen hundred years later he is standing on another mountain talking with a man whose face is doing the same thing, on purpose. This is the month's last word on how change actually happens, and it is the simplest one: you become what you look at.

OPENING QUESTION (5 MINUTES)

Has anyone ever told you that you seemed different, in a good way, before you had noticed it yourself? What were you doing in that stretch of your life? What did they see that you couldn't?

SCRIPTURE READING

Read aloud: Exodus 33:18 to 23 and 34:5 to 8, then 34:29 to 35.

Reference passages: Exodus 19:10 to 11 (getting ready), Luke 9:28 to 36 (the other mountain), 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 4:6 (the unveiled face), Psalm 90:17 (the prayer of Moses).

THE STORY (READ ALOUD, 10 TO 15 MINUTES)

Moses was born to Hebrew slaves in Egypt and raised in Pharaoh's household, which means he grew up as a prince inside the empire that owned his family. In his forties he killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew, buried the body in the sand, and ran. He spent the next forty years on the far side of the desert keeping somebody else's sheep. By the time God spoke to him out of a burning bush, he was a shepherd with a stutter and a criminal record, and Exodus tells us plainly that he was eighty years old when he finally walked in and spoke to Pharaoh.

Then the plagues, the Passover, the sea, and a nation of former slaves walking out into open country. And within three months they are camped at the foot of a mountain in Sinai, and God tells Moses to get them ready, because he is coming down.

Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.

EXODUS 19:10 TO 11

Wash their garments. The Hebrew verb is *kabas*, and it is not the word for taking a bath. That is a different word, *rachats*. *Kabas* is a laundry word, what a fuller does, treading and beating cloth in water until the dirt comes out of the fibers. It is physical, it takes time, and it is the word the Old Testament uses over and over for getting ready to be near God.

Which is why it is startling where it turns up later. David, after the worst thing he ever did, prays with the same verb.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

PSALM 51:7

Wash *me*. He takes the word for scrubbing a filthy garment and puts himself in the tub, and then hands the work to somebody else. That is the whole distance between the two testaments in one sentence. You can wash your clothes. You cannot wash yourself.

Now, what happens on that mountain is that the people are given the law, and while Moses is up there receiving it they build a golden calf at the bottom of it. It is one of the fastest collapses in the Bible. And in the aftermath of that, when God has said he will send them on with an angel rather than going with them himself, Moses does something audacious. He asks for more.

Moses said, "Please show me your glory."

EXODUS 33:18

Not show me the way. Not fix the people. Show me you. And God's answer is one of the most careful things in Scripture.

But, he said, you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.

EXODUS 33:20

Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.

EXODUS 33:21 TO 23

Read what God does there. He does not refuse. He finds a way to give as much as a human being can survive, and he covers Moses with his own hand while the dangerous part goes past. That is a picture of God's care that the rest of the Bible keeps returning to.

And then, the next morning, he passes by and tells Moses what his glory actually is. This matters, because we assume glory means brightness.

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty."

EXODUS 34:5 TO 7

When God defines his own glory, he lists his character. Merciful, gracious, patient, overflowing with love, forgiving. And then, without softening it, that he does not simply wave sin through. Both halves are his glory. A God who forgave without dealing with anything would not be good, he would be indifferent, and the cross is where those two halves of that sentence finally meet in one place.

Then Moses comes down.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

EXODUS 34:29

Moses did not know.

That is the sentence this session is built on. The change was real, it was visible from a distance, it frightened people, and the one person who could not see it was the man it happened to. He had no mirror and no sensation of it. He found out because of the look on his brother's face.

Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him.

EXODUS 34:30

The Hebrew verb for shone is *qaran*, and it is an odd, vivid word. It comes from *qeren*, the word for a horn, so it carries the idea of something projecting outward, rays shooting off like horns of light. Centuries later, when Jerome translated the Old Testament into Latin, he rendered it literally as *horned*, and that reading fed a long tradition in medieval art of depicting Moses with horns. Michelangelo's famous statue in Rome is the most well known example of it. A translator's literal choice about one Hebrew verb is still sitting in marble.

So Moses starts wearing a veil, taking it off whenever he goes back in to speak with God and putting it on again when he comes out to the people.

Hold that image and jump fourteen hundred years.

Jesus takes Peter, John, and James up a mountain to pray. And while he is praying, Luke says the appearance of his face was altered and his clothing became dazzling white. Matthew uses a specific Greek verb for what happened to him: *metamorphoo*. The same verb Paul uses in Romans 12 for what is supposed to be happening to you.

And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

LUKE 9:30 TO 31

Moses is standing there. The man who once asked to see God's glory and was hidden in a rock is now in a conversation with it, on a mountain, in the open. And the word Luke uses for the *departure* they are discussing is *exodos*. They are talking about a crucifixion, and Luke calls it an exodus, because a second and larger rescue is about to happen and the man who led the first one is right there for the briefing.

Then a voice from a cloud says: this is my Son, my Chosen One, listen to him.

And the difference between the two mountains is everything. Moses reflected a light that landed on him from outside and then faded, so he covered it. Jesus was not reflecting. It was coming out.

Which brings us to the verse the entire month has been walking toward, written by Paul, who knew exactly what he was doing when he reached for Moses and the veil.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

2 CORINTHIANS 3:18

Take that sentence apart slowly, because every piece of it is load bearing.

We all. Not Moses, not the apostles, not the professionals. Everybody in the room.

With unveiled face. The veil is gone. What Moses had to hide, you are invited to stand in.

Beholding. The only active verb in the sentence is looking. That is your entire assignment.

Are being transformed. This is *metamorphoo* again, in the present tense and the passive voice. Present, meaning it is going on right now and is not finished. Passive, meaning it is being done to you and not by you. It is the same verb used for what happened to the face of Jesus on that mountain.

From one degree of glory to another. Which means in stages. Which means the fact that you are not there yet is written into the promise.

You become what you look at. That is not a slogan, that is the mechanism the verse describes. Moses did not work on his face. He spent time in the presence of God and his face did what faces do. And he could not see it, because nobody ever sees their own face shine. Other people do. That is how you find out where you have been.

You never see your own face shine. Other people do. That is how you know where you have been.

Two more things, and then the point.

The first is a lamb. On the night before the exodus, God told every household to take a lamb, and the requirement was one word: *tamim*, without blemish, whole, nothing wrong with it. The lamb had to be flawless so that the family behind the door did not have to be. Every honest reader of this month has had the same thought somewhere around session three, which is that they cannot possibly be good enough for any of this. The Passover answers it before the question is asked. The requirement was met by the lamb.

The second is a word about being tired, because five weeks of talking about transformation can leave a person exhausted. Isaiah writes to people at the end of themselves.

Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

ISAIAH 40:30 TO 31

The Hebrew verb behind *renew* there is *chalaph*, and it does not mean recharge. It means to exchange, to swap one thing out for another. So renewed strength is not you being given a bigger tank of your own. It is a trade. You hand him what is left of yours and take his.

And the last word of the month is the strangest one in the Bible. It appears seventy one times in the Psalms and three more times in Habakkuk, and nobody knows for certain what it means. The best guesses are a musical rest, an instruction to the players, or a note to lift something up. What everyone agrees on is that it stops the sentence.

Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth! The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

PSALM 46:10 TO 11

A month about God changing people ends on a word that means stop. That is not an accident of the calendar. You become what you look at, and you cannot look at anything while you are running.

Moses lived to a hundred and twenty. Deuteronomy says his eye was undimmed and his vigor unabated, which is a strange and lovely detail to preserve about an old man. And there is one psalm in the Bible with his name on it, and it ends with a request that anybody who has read this far will recognize.

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!

PSALM 90:17

He asks twice. Make this last. Make something I did with these hands hold up after I am gone. And it did, in stone tablets and in a nation and in a conversation on a mountain fourteen hundred years later.

You become what you look at. Your job is not to shine. Your job is to stay in the room where the light is, long enough and often enough that other people start to notice something you cannot see.

WORD STUDY SPOTLIGHT

כָּבַס **kabas** (*kah-VAS*)

STRONG'S H3526

MEANING To wash by treading and beating. What a fuller does to cloth.

APPEARS 51 times in the Hebrew Bible

KEY VERSE Let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. (Exodus 19:10)

Hebrew keeps two washing words apart. *Rachats* is for a body, *kabas* is for cloth, and it is hard physical work done by stamping the dirt out. So when David prays *kabas* over himself in Psalm 51, he is deliberately using the wrong word about the wrong object, and asking God to do the treading. He knows exactly how deep the stain is and exactly who can reach it.

אֹר **or** (*ore*)

STRONG'S H216

MEANING Light. Also a source of light, and figuratively favor, life, and joy.

APPEARS about 121 times

KEY VERSE For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts. (2 Corinthians 4:6)

This is the fourth word in the Hebrew Bible's opening act, the first thing God calls into being. When Paul wants to describe what happens when a person comes to know God, he does not reach for a religious word. He reaches back to Genesis 1 and says it is the same event happening again on a smaller scale, in a person, and that the light in question has a face.

קָרַן **qaran** (*kah-RAN*)

STRONG'S H7160

MEANING To send out rays. To shine. Built from the noun for a horn.

APPEARS 4 times: Exodus 34:29, 34:30, 34:35, and Psalm 69:31

KEY VERSE Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone. (Exodus 34:29)

Three of its four occurrences are about Moses' face. The word pictures light projecting outward the way a horn juts from a head, which is why Jerome's Latin translation rendered it *horned* and why a tradition of horned Moses statues runs through medieval and Renaissance art. The more useful detail is the tense of the sentence around it: he did not know. The glow was a side effect, never a goal.

תָּמִים **tamim** (*tah-MEEM*)

STRONG'S H8549

MEANING Whole, complete, without blemish. Used of sacrifices and of integrity.

APPEARS 91 times in the Hebrew Bible

KEY VERSE Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. (Exodus 12:5)

Notice who the standard applies to. The requirement never lands on the family inside the house. It lands on the lamb. Everything the Old Testament sacrificial system says about perfection is said about the substitute, which is why the New Testament calls Jesus a lamb without blemish and why nobody reading this month needs to manufacture the flawlessness themselves.

חָלַף **chalaph** (*khah-LAF*)

STRONG'S H2498

MEANING To pass on, to change, to exchange one thing for another. To renew.

APPEARS 28 times in the Hebrew Bible

KEY VERSE They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength. (Isaiah 40:31)

This is the difference between rest and renewal. Rest refills what you have. *Chalaph* swaps it. The people in Isaiah 40 are not promised more of their own stamina, they are promised a trade, which is why the verse says even young men fall over. Age and effort are not the variable. Waiting is. And waiting, in Hebrew, is an active word, closer to twisting a rope together than to sitting in a chair.

δόξα **doxa** (DOX-ah)

STRONG'S G1391

MEANING Glory, splendor, weight of honor. The visible worth of a thing.

APPEARS about 167 times in the New Testament

KEY VERSE Beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

In Greek this word originally meant opinion or reputation, what people rightly think of you. The Greek Old Testament used it to translate the Hebrew *kavod*, which literally means weight. Put those together and glory is not brightness for its own sake, it is substance made visible. Which is exactly what God listed when Moses asked to see it: not lightning, character.

סֵלָה **selah** (SEH-lah)

STRONG'S H5542

MEANING Uncertain. Most likely a pause, a musical rest, or a direction to lift up.

APPEARS 74 times: 71 in the Psalms, across 39 of them, and 3 in Habakkuk 3

KEY VERSE The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah (Psalm 46:11)

This is the honest one. Nobody knows what it means, and that includes the ancient translators, who rendered it into Greek with a word just as obscure. What we can see is where it sits. It lands after something too big to move past quickly. Ending a month about transformation on a word that probably means stop is not a shrug. It is the last instruction.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (20 TO 25 MINUTES)

OBSERVATION ■ WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

- 1 In Exodus 33:18 to 23, what does Moses ask for, what does God refuse, and what does God provide instead? What does God do with his own hand?
- 2 In Exodus 34:5 to 7, God proclaims his own name. List every quality he names. Which one is hardest to hold together with the others?
- 3 In Exodus 34:29, who knows about the shining and who does not? Who tells Moses?

INTERPRETATION ■ WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

- 1 God defines his own glory as character rather than brightness. How does that change what it would mean to ask God to show you his glory today?
- 2 In 2 Corinthians 3:18 the only active verb is beholding, and the transformation verb is passive. What does that do to the idea that spiritual growth is mostly effort?
- 3 Moses reflected a light that faded and had to be covered. Jesus was the source. Why does Paul say we now stand unveiled? What changed?

- 4 The month ends on a word nobody can fully define, which probably means stop. Why might God put a word like that in the Bible seventy four times?

APPLICATION ■ WHAT DO I DO?

- 1 What are you actually looking at most hours of the day? Not what you value. What has your attention. If you become what you look at, what are you currently becoming?
- 2 Name the tiredness that rest does not touch. What would it look like to make the trade Isaiah 40 describes instead of trying to refill your own tank again?
- 3 When was the last time you stopped for long enough to be still? Put an actual stop on the calendar this week, with a start time and an end time, and tell somebody in the group when it is.

CROSS REFERENCES

2 CORINTHIANS 4:6 God, who said let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Genesis 1 happening again, in a person, with a face attached.

DEUTERONOMY 34:7 Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye undimmed and his vigor unabated. A quiet argument that a life spent in that presence does not wear out the way we expect.

NUMBERS 12:3 The man Moses was very meek, more than all people on the face of the earth. Written about the same man who once killed somebody in anger. The month's thesis in a single verse.

PERSONAL REFLECTION (SOLO JOURNALING)

- 1 Write down what you would want washed off before God looked at you. Then read Psalm 51:7 and write it out underneath, in the first person.
- 2 Who has told you that you seemed different lately? Write what they said. If nobody has, ask somebody this week and write down the answer.
- 3 What in you feels like it has not moved all month? Write it out, and then write out 2 Corinthians 3:18 underneath it, paying attention to the phrase *from one degree of glory to another*.

WEEKLY PRACTICE: TWELVE MINUTES AND A MIRROR YOU DO NOT OWN

This week has only two assignments and one of them is doing nothing.

EVERY DAY. Twelve minutes. Phone in another room. Read one paragraph of a Gospel, then sit and look at him without asking for anything. When your mind wanders, and it will, come back without commentary. Twelve minutes, six days. That is the beholding.

ONCE THIS WEEK. Ask one person who knows you well this exact question: have you noticed anything different about me in the last month? Do not explain why you are asking and do not argue with the answer. Write it down word for word.

Moses found out about his face from other people. So will you.

CLOSING PRAYER PROMPT

As you close, pray about these three things.

Show me your glory. Pray Moses' prayer in your own words, and then be quiet long enough to let the answer be his character rather than an experience.

The trade. Name where you are running on empty and ask for the exchange in Isaiah 40 rather than for more of your own strength.

Stillness. Ask for the willingness to stop, and be honest with him about why stopping is hard for you specifically.



SESSION SIX

The Same Hands

INTEGRATION ■ THE WHOLE MONTH ■ WHAT TO DO ON MONDAY

OVERVIEW

Five sessions, five people, five completely different pictures. Wet clay on a wheel. Silver in a crucible. A vine under a knife. A man face down on a road. An old face glowing in the dark. This session steps back and asks what they have in common, and the answer turns out to be sitting in plain sight in the grammar of every single one of them.

OPENING QUESTION (5 MINUTES)

Across all five sessions, what actually landed? Not the one you think should have been most important. The line, the word, or the question that stuck to you and came back later in the week. Start there and let everyone answer before anything else.

Here is what we built, one week at a time. And underneath all of it, running the whole way through, is one thing nobody points at while it is happening.

Session one put you in a workshop. Jeremiah, a priest's son from a village three miles outside Jerusalem, spent forty years telling his own country the truth and nobody ever listened. He said the reason was *lev*, the heart, which in Hebrew is not your feelings but your control room, the place you think and decide and talk yourself into things. And he said it lies to you. Then God walked him down to a potter's house and showed him a pot going wrong in a man's hands and getting reworked into another vessel out of the same *chomer*, the same cheap wet dirt they made bricks out of in Egypt. The word for the potter, *yotser*, is built on the same verb God used for what he did to Jeremiah in the womb. And the only difference between the pot that got reworked and the flask that got smashed was that one was still soft.

Session two put you at two fires. Peter, a fisherman with a boat and a house, warmed his hands at an *anthrakia* in a courtyard and said three times that he had never met Jesus. Days later there was another *anthrakia* on a beach with fish already on it, and three questions to match the three denials, and a job at the end of every answer. In between, the metal words: *sig*, the dross that was always in the silver and only floats where the fire can reach it; *tsaraph*, the refiner who sits and does not leave the crucible; *dokimion*, the proven genuineness that the fire produces, which is not a smaller version of you but the real one.

Session three put you in a vineyard. Isaiah sang a love song about a man who dug a hill, cleared its stones, planted choice vines, built a tower and cut a winepress, and got sour fruit. And the judgment was not a knife. The judgment was *zamar*, pruning, being taken away. Seven hundred years later Jesus stood in that same story and said he was the true vine and his Father held the knife, and that the branches that get cut are the ones already bearing. The verb for pruning, *kathairo*, is built out of the word for clean, which he used one sentence later to tell them they already were. And the only instruction he gave was *meno*. Stay attached.

Session four put you on a road. Saul of Tarsus, top of his class, held the coats while a man was stoned and then went house to house dragging people to prison, absolutely certain he was serving God. A light knocked him flat, three days of blindness, and a frightened believer named Ananias walked into that house and called him brother. And the man who came out of it wrote that you are not conformed from the outside by a mold, *syschematizo*, but transformed from the inside, *metamorphoo*, by the renewal of the *nous*, the mind, which is the Greek room with the Hebrew name from session one. And the renewing was *day by day*, through years in Arabia and Tarsus that nobody wrote down.

Session five put you on a mountain. Moses, eighty years old, asked to see God's glory and was hidden in a crack in a rock with God's own hand over him while it went past. And when God defined his glory, he listed his character. Moses came down with his face throwing off light, *qaran*, and did not know. Fourteen

hundred years later he stood on another mountain next to a face that was not reflecting anything, and Paul wrote the sentence the whole month was walking toward: with unveiled face, beholding, we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another.

Now here is the thread.

Go back and look at what the person in each story actually does.

The clay does not rework itself. It cannot. It is wet dirt, and the only thing that determines its future is whose hands it is in and whether it has gone hard. The silver does not refine itself. It cannot even see its own dross until somebody else applies heat. The branch does not prune itself, and it has never once in the history of agriculture grown a grape by trying. The mind does not renew itself, because the mind is the compromised instrument; that was the whole diagnosis in week one. And the face does not make itself shine. Moses did not even know it was happening.

Five stories. Five passives. In every one, the person being changed is not the person doing the changing.

That should be the most discouraging sentence in this book, and it is the opposite, because of what it does to your job description. If transformation were your project, the ceiling would be you, and you have already met that ceiling more than once. It isn't. So what is left for you to do?

The whole month gives you exactly two active verbs.

Abide. Stay attached. Do not detach from the vine. That is session three.

Behold. Look at him. That is session five, and it is the only active verb in 2 Corinthians 3:18.

Stay, and look. That is the entire assignment. Everything else in this study is something done to you by somebody else.

Stay where he can reach you, and keep looking at him. Everything else in this book is his work, not yours.

And there is one more thing sitting on top of all five, which is where this session gets its name.

Count the hands. The potter's hands, with the pot spoiled in them and reworked in the same ones. The refiner's hands, holding a crucible he will not walk away from. The gardener's hands, in the dirt around a fig tree that has produced nothing for three years, asking for one more. God's own hand, covering Moses in the cleft of the rock while the glory goes past. Ananias' hands, laid on the shoulders of a man who came to town with a warrant for his arrest. And a pair of hands with a towel, on the last night, washing the feet of the man who was about to deny him.

Different tools. Clay, fire, a knife, a light, a face. Same hands, all month, on every page.

And the last thing worth noticing is where the month starts and where it ends, because it is a straight line.

It starts on September first with Jeremiah saying the thing that needs to change is the thing doing the deciding, and you cannot reach it. That is the problem, stated as bluntly as the Bible ever states it.

It ends thirty days later with Paul saying that people who look at God are changed by it, in stages, without being able to feel it happening.

That is not two topics. That is a question and its answer. You cannot get into your own control room. But you can decide what you look at, and what you look at gets in there anyway.

THE WORDS OF THIS MONTH

THE MATERIAL ■ SESSION ONE

lev, the heart, the control room where you decide. yatsar, to form, the potter's verb and the womb's verb. chomer, clay, the same word as Egyptian brick mortar. bachan, to assay metal, what God does to a heart. chakam, skilled, the thing you must not hang your life on. chadash, to make new, prayed from the ruins. kerem, a vineyard, the least portable thing you can buy while an army is at the wall.

THE FIRE ■ SESSION TWO

anthrakia, a charcoal fire, twice in the New Testament and both times beside Peter. louo, the bath that happens once, against the daily rinse. sig, dross, already in the silver before the heat. tsaraph, to refine, and the refiner sits. dokimazo, to test in order to approve. dokimion, the proven genuineness left behind. pyrosis, a smelting, which is what Peter calls your hard season.

THE KNIFE ■ SESSION THREE

zamar, to prune, and not being pruned is the judgment. ampelos, the vine, which is him and not you. kathairo, to prune, built from the word for clean. meno, to stay, the only thing a branch is asked to do. peri, fruit, on a tree whose roots reach water. karpos, fruit, singular, with nine sides. teleios, finished and ripe, not flawless.

THE MIND ■ SESSION FOUR

metanoeo, to change your mind so completely that your body turns around. nous, the mind, the Greek name for session one's room. syschematizo, pressed into a mold from outside. metamorphoo, changed from the inside, four times in the New Testament. photizo, to shine light on what is already there. anakainoo, renewed, always present tense, always passive. allasso, exchanged, in the twinkling of an eye.

THE FACE ■ SESSION FIVE

kabas, to wash by treading, which David asks God to do to him. or, light, the first thing God ever made. qaran, to send out rays, three of its four uses on one man's face. tamim, without blemish, required of the lamb and not of you. chalaph, to exchange, which is what renewed strength actually is. doxa, glory, meaning weight and character made visible. selah, meaning stop, probably, and nobody is certain.

INTEGRATION QUESTIONS (20 TO 25 MINUTES)

- 1 Five images: clay, fire, a knife, a light, a face. Which one describes what God has been doing in you this year? Which one would you least like it to be?
- 2 Session one says God reworks what went wrong. Session three says he cuts what is going right. How do those two live together without turning God into someone unpredictable?
- 3 The person being changed is never the one doing the changing, in any of the five stories. Say honestly how that lands on you: as relief, as frustration, or as something you do not quite believe yet.
- 4 The month gives you two active verbs, abide and behold. Which of the two are you worse at, and what does that cost you in practice?
- 5 Jeremiah's *lev* and Paul's *nous* are the same room in two languages. If that room is compromised and also the target of the renewal, what is the practical difference between trying to think better and being renewed?
- 6 Look back at the hands: the potter, the refiner, the gardener, the hand over the cleft, Ananias, the towel. Which pair do you most need on you right now?

MONTH LONG REFLECTION

- 1 What is the single thing you are carrying out of these six sessions? Not the most impressive one. The one that changed something in how you pray, think, or act.
- 2 Go back to the paper from session one, where you wrote down the thing you had privately decided was ruined. Read it again. What would you write underneath it now?
- 3 Which word from this month has most changed the way you read Scripture? If somebody asked you to explain it in thirty seconds, what would you say?
- 4 How has your picture of God shifted? Not your view of a doctrine. Your view of the one who reworks clay, sits by a crucible, digs around a barren tree, calls a murderer brother, and covers a man with his hand so the glory does not kill him. What kind of God is that?

GOING DEEPER

A LONG OBEDIENCE IN THE SAME DIRECTION, EUGENE PETERSON A book about discipleship as slow work, built on the Psalms of Ascent. If session four's day by day was the part that got you, start here.

RENOVATION OF THE HEART, DALLAS WILLARD A careful book about how a whole person actually changes, including the mind, the body, and the will. It is the long version of what Romans 12:2 says in one sentence.

GENTLE AND LOWLY, DANE ORTLUND On the heart of Christ toward people who keep failing. Read it if session two was the one that would not leave you alone.

NEXT MONTH: WORDS OF BATTLE

September asked how a person gets changed. The answer was that somebody else does it, and your part is to stay and to look. October asks a different question, and it is the one that shows up the second you start actually living this way: what happens when something fights back.

Because it does. The month you decide to abide is the month your calendar fills up. The week you decide to behold is the week everything is loud. That is not a coincidence and the Bible does not treat it like one. Words of Battle is about the vocabulary Scripture uses for standing, resisting, armor, strength, and the fight that a changed person finds themselves in, and it begins on Tuesday, October 6.

The clay does not have to win a war. But it does have to stay on the wheel while one is going on around it.

September, Day by Day

One word a day, Tuesday through Sunday, in the week it belongs to. Mondays are dark on purpose.

This page is the bridge between the guide in your hands and the daily videos. Every word below gets its own short teaching video the morning of, plus a second short that puts you inside the story, a longer story video on Wednesdays, and a podcast episode on Sundays. You can use this page with no screen at all. Read the word, read the verse, carry the sentence.

Everything lands permanently and free in the library at library.faithlabz.com, usually the same night it airs. The videos are posted the day they run, so if you are reading this early in the month, the later entries are still on their way.

WEEK ONE ■ JEREMIAH ■ THE POTTER'S HOUSE

DAY	WORD	VERSE	WHAT IT LEAVES YOU WITH
TUE 1	lev	Jeremiah 17:9	The thing that needs to change is the thing doing the deciding.
WED 2	chomer	Jeremiah 18:6	God does not throw the clay away. The rework happens in the same hands that made you.
THU 3	bachan	Jeremiah 20:12	You are allowed to say the rawest true thing you have to God. Under weight, that is what faith sounds like.
FRI 4	chakam	Jeremiah 9:23	Everything you are good at can burn in a night. Knowing God is the one thing that does not.
SAT 5	chadash	Lamentations 5:21	New mercy arrives on the morning after the worst day, not after you feel better.
SUN 6	kerem	Jeremiah 32:15	Hope in the Bible has a receipt. Buy the field.

Monday, September 7. Dark. Nothing posts. Rest is part of the plan.

WEEK TWO ■ PETER ■ THE TWO CHARCOAL FIRES

DAY	WORD	VERSE	WHAT IT LEAVES YOU WITH
TUE 8	louo	John 13:10	You were washed once, all of you. You need your feet washed every day.
WED 9	dokimazo	1 Peter 1:7	The test is not to find out whether you will fail. It shows what is real in you.
THU 10	sig	Proverbs 25:4	Heat does not put the ugly in you. It brings up what was already there so it can be lifted off.
FRI 11	tsaraph	Malachi 3:3	The refiner sits. He is not going anywhere while you are in the fire.
SAT 12	dokimion	James 1:3	What comes out of the fire is not a smaller you. It is the real one.
SUN 13	pyrosis	1 Peter 4:12	Do not be surprised by the fire. Be surprised who is telling you so.

Monday, September 14. Dark.

WEEK THREE ■ THE VINEYARD ■ ONE MORE YEAR

DAY	WORD	VERSE	WHAT IT LEAVES YOU WITH
TUE 15	zamar	Isaiah 5:6	The knife is not the judgment. The knife going away is.
WED 16	ampelos	John 15:5	You are not the vine. A branch that tries to be the vine dies of the effort.
THU 17	peri	Jeremiah 17:8	Fruit is not something you produce. It is what happens to a tree that stays near the water.
FRI 18	kathairo	John 15:2	Pruning happens to the branches that are working. The cut is a vote of confidence.
SAT 19	karpos	John 15:8	The proof you are attached is not what you do for him. It is what grows on you.
SUN 20	teleios	James 1:4	Mature does not mean flawless. It means finished growing in the direction you were planted.

Monday, September 21. Dark.

WEEK FOUR ■ PAUL ■ THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

DAY	WORD	VERSE	WHAT IT LEAVES YOU WITH
TUE 22	metanoeo	Acts 26:20	Repentance is not feeling bad. It is a changed mind that turns the body around.
WED 23	nous	Romans 12:2	Your mind is not renewed by trying harder with the old one.
THU 24	photizo	Ephesians 1:18	Sometimes the first thing God does to your sight is take it.
FRI 25	anakainoo	2 Corinthians 4:16	Damascus took a minute. The renewing took the rest of his life, and day by day is the method.
SAT 26	metamorphoo	Romans 12:2	God does not swap you out for someone else. He transforms the person you already are.
SUN 27	allasso	1 Corinthians 15:51	The change you are waiting for is real, and the down payment is who you are slowly becoming.

Monday, September 28. Dark.

WEEK FIVE ■ MOSES ■ THE SHINING FACE

DAY	WORD	VERSE	WHAT IT LEAVES YOU WITH
TUE 29	kabas	Exodus 19:10	You get ready to meet God by getting clean, and the deepest part of it you cannot do yourself.
WED 30	or	Exodus 34:29	You never see your own face shine. Other people do. That is how you know where you have been.
THU, OCT 1	tamim	Exodus 12:5	The lamb was flawless so you did not have to be.
FRI, OCT 2	chalaph	Isaiah 40:31	Renewed strength is not you getting stronger. It is you trading yours for his.
SAT, OCT 3	selah	Psalms 46:10	You become what you look at, and you cannot look while you are running.
SUN, OCT 4	doxa	2 Corinthians 3:18	From one degree of glory to another. Slow is not the same as stuck.

The Moses week runs past the end of the month on purpose. A story week does not stop at a calendar boundary. October's theme, Words of Battle, opens on Tuesday, October 6.

Appendix: The Complete Word Glossary

Every Hebrew and Greek word taught across the six sessions, in alphabetical order.

Use this as a quick reference during personal study, in a group when somebody asks what a word was again, or whenever one of these turns up in your own reading. Occurrence counts are given as sources report them, and where two standard sources disagree the range is shown rather than a false precision.

ἀλλάσσω **allasso** (AL-LAS-SO) ■ GREEK ■ G236 ■ 6 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 4

To change or exchange one thing for another. The instant change, in the twinkling of an eye. *Key verse: 1 Corinthians 15:51*

ἀμπelos **ampelos** (AM-PEL-OS) ■ GREEK ■ G288 ■ ABOUT 9 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 3

A grapevine. The rooted main stock that every branch borrows its life from. *Key verse: John 15:5*

ἀνακαινów **anakainoo** (AN-AK-AHEE-NO-OH) ■ GREEK ■ G341 ■ 2 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 4

To renew, to make new again on the inside. Always present tense, always passive. The noun form appears in Romans 12:2 and Titus 3:5. *Key verse: 2 Corinthians 4:16*

ἀνθρακιά **anthrakia** (AN-THRAH-KEE-AH) ■ GREEK ■ G439 ■ 2 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 2

A charcoal fire. Appears only at John 18:18 and John 21:9, and Peter is standing at both. *Key verse: John 21:9*

בַּחַן **bachan** (BAH-KHAN) ■ HEBREW ■ H974 ■ 29 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 1

To examine or test, especially to assay metal by fire in order to prove what it truly is. *Key verse: Jeremiah 20:12*

חַדָּשׁ **chadash** (KHAH-DASH) ■ HEBREW ■ H2318 ■ 10 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 1

To make new again. To renew, repair, or restore what is worn out. *Key verse: Lamentations 5:21*

חָכָם **chakam** (KHAH-KAHM) ■ HEBREW ■ H2450 ■ 137 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 1

Wise, skilled, competent. Used of craftsmen and sailors as much as of scholars. *Key verse: Jeremiah 9:23*

חָלַף **chalaph** (KHAH-LAF) ■ HEBREW ■ H2498 ■ 28 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 5

To pass on, to change, to exchange. Renewed strength as a trade rather than a recharge. *Key verse: Isaiah 40:31*

חֶמֶר **chomer** (KHO-MER) ■ HEBREW ■ H2563 ■ ABOUT 30 TO 33 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 1

Clay, wet mortar, mud for building. The same word as the brick mortar of Exodus 1:14. *Key verse: Jeremiah 18:6*

δοκιμάζω **dokimazo** (DOK-EE-MAD-ZO) ■ GREEK ■ G1381 ■ ABOUT 22 TO 23 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 2

To test something in order to prove it genuine, and then to approve it. Approval is built into the word. *Key verse: 1 Peter 1:7*

δοκίμιον **dokimion** (DOK-EE-MEE-ON) ■ GREEK ■ G1383 ■ 2 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 2

The proven genuineness left after testing. The assayer's stamp. Only at 1 Peter 1:7 and James 1:3. *Key verse: 1 Peter 1:7*

δόξα **doxa** (DOX-AH) ■ GREEK ■ G1391 ■ ABOUT 167 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 5

Glory. Substance and worth made visible. Translates the Hebrew *kavod*, which literally means weight. *Key verse: 2 Corinthians 3:18*

כַּבַּס **kabas** (KAH-VAS) ■ HEBREW ■ H3526 ■ 51 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 5

To wash by treading and beating, as a fuller cleans cloth. Used of garments, not of bodies. *Key verse: Exodus 19:10, and Psalm 51:7*

καρπός **karpos** (KAR-POS) ■ GREEK ■ G2590 ■ 66 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 3

Fruit. In Galatians 5:22 it is singular, with nine qualities named as one thing. *Key verse: John 15:8*

καθαίρω **kathairo** (KATH-AH-EE-RO) ■ GREEK ■ G2508 ■ 1 OCCURRENCE ■ SESSION 3

To prune a vine. To cleanse by cutting away. Built from *katharos*, clean. *Key verse: John 15:2*

כֶּרֶם **kerem** (KEH-REM) ■ HEBREW ■ H3754 ■ 93 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 1

A vineyard. The least portable investment a person can make. *Key verse: Jeremiah 32:15*

לֵב **lev** (LEV) ■ HEBREW ■ H3820 ■ 593 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 1

The heart. The inner person: mind, will, decision, moral center. Not primarily the emotions. *Key verse: Jeremiah 17:9*

λούω **louo** (LOO-OH) ■ GREEK ■ G3068 ■ 5 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 2

To bathe the whole body. Set against *nipto*, washing a part, in the same verse. *Key verse: John 13:10*

μένω **meno** (MEH-NO) ■ GREEK ■ G3306 ■ ABOUT 118 TO 120 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 3

To stay, remain, abide. Not a striving word. The opposite of detaching. *Key verse: John 15:4*

μεταμορφώω **metamorphoo** (MET-AM-OR-FO-OH) ■ GREEK ■ G3339 ■ 4 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSIONS 4 AND 5

To be transformed, changed in form from the inside. Matthew 17:2, Mark 9:2, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 3:18. *Key verse: Romans 12:2*

μετανοέω **metanoeo** (MET-AN-O-EH-OH) ■ GREEK ■ G3340 ■ 34 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 4

To change your mind, and so to turn. Repentance as a reversal of thinking that moves the body. *Key verse: Acts 26:20*

νοῦς **nous** (NOOCE) ■ GREEK ■ G3563 ■ 24 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 4

The mind. The faculty of understanding and moral judgment. The Greek counterpart to Hebrew *lev*. *Key verse: Romans 12:2*

אֹר **or** (ORE) ■ HEBREW ■ H216 ■ ABOUT 121 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 5

Light. The first thing God calls into being, and the word Paul reaches back for in 2 Corinthians 4:6. *Key verse: Exodus 34:29*

פֶּרִי **peri** (PEH-REE) ■ HEBREW ■ H6529 ■ 119 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 3

Fruit or produce. Used for what a tree yields and for what a life yields, without changing metaphors. *Key verse: Jeremiah 17:8*

φωτίζω **photizo** (FO-TID-ZO) ■ GREEK ■ G5461 ■ 11 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 4

To shed light on. To enlighten. Usually not new information, but a lamp in a room you were already in. *Key verse: Ephesians 1:18*

πύρωσις **pyrosis** (POO-ROH-SIS) ■ GREEK ■ G4451 ■ 3 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 2

A burning, a smelting. The strongest available word for a hard season, and Peter does not soften it. *Key verse: 1 Peter 4:12*

קָרַן **qaran** (KAH-RAN) ■ HEBREW ■ H7160 ■ 4 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 5

To send out rays, to shine. Built from *qeren*, a horn. Three of its four uses describe Moses' face. *Key verse: Exodus 34:29*

סֵלָה **selah** (SEH-LAH) ■ HEBREW ■ H5542 ■ 74 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 5

Meaning uncertain. Most likely a pause, a musical rest, or a direction to lift up. 71 times in the Psalms and 3 in Habakkuk 3. *Key verse: Psalm 46:11*

סִיג **sig** (SEEG) ■ HEBREW ■ H5509 ■ ABOUT 8 TO 9 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 2

Dross. The waste that rises to the surface of molten silver. It was in the ore before the fire. *Key verse: Proverbs 25:4*

συσχηματίζω **syschematizo** (SOOS-KHAY-MAT-ID-ZO) ■ GREEK ■ G4964 ■ 2 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 4

To be pressed into an outside pattern. Surface conformity, applied by a mold. *Key verse: Romans 12:2*

תָּמִים **tamim** (TAH-MEEM) ■ HEBREW ■ H8549 ■ 91 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 5

Whole, complete, without blemish. The requirement that landed on the lamb, not on the family. *Key verse: Exodus 12:5*

τέλειος **teleios** (TEH-LAY-OS) ■ GREEK ■ G5046 ■ 19 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 3

Complete, mature, full grown. From *telos*, an end or goal. Ripe rather than unblemished. *Key verse: James 1:4*

צָרַף **tsaraph** (TSAH-RAF) ■ HEBREW ■ H6884 ■ ABOUT 33 TO 34 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 2

To smelt or refine metal. Its participle is the noun for a metalworker, which is the job title Malachi gives God. *Key verse: Malachi 3:3*

יָצַר **yatsar** (YAH-TSAR) ■ HEBREW ■ H3335 ■ ABOUT 62 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 1

To form or shape as a potter does. The participle *yotser* is the word for a potter. Also the verb of Genesis 2:7. *Key verse: Jeremiah 1:5*

זָמַר **zamar** (ZAH-MAR) ■ HEBREW ■ H2168 ■ 3 OCCURRENCES ■ SESSION 3

To prune or trim a vine. Leviticus 25:3, Leviticus 25:4, and Isaiah 5:6, where not pruning is the sentence. *Key verse: Isaiah 5:6*

Notes



A series of horizontal lines for writing notes, consisting of 25 evenly spaced lines across the page.

About FaithLabz

The goal is simple and it is not modest: to make the depth of Scripture reachable by anybody, without watering it down and without assuming you already know the stories.

The Bible is not a book of religious slogans. It is a library of ancient documents written in real languages by real people, and the further you go into those languages, the more alive the text gets. That is the whole idea behind the daily word: one Hebrew or Greek word, sitting exactly where the Bible puts it.

And the stories get told, from the beginning, every time. If you have sat in church for thirty years and could not retell what happened to Zacchaeus or why Jeremiah ended up in a hole, that is not a failing on your part. It is a gap in how the stories usually get taught. Nothing here will assume you already know.

WHERE TO FIND EVERYTHING

The free library. Every word study ever made, searchable, at library.faithlabz.com. No login, nothing for sale on the other side of it.

YouTube. Two shorts a day Tuesday through Sunday, a story video on Wednesdays, the podcast on Sundays. Mondays are dark.

The monthly Bible studies. A new one like this every month, free, at library.faithlabz.com/studies. Everything else lives at faithlabz.com, and @FaithLabz on the usual places.

HOW THIS STAYS FREE

This study cost you nothing and it is going to stay that way. So did the library, and the videos, and the study before this one.

There are a few things for sale at faithlabz.com. A 365 day devotional called The Whole Story in a Year. Devotional coffee mugs you scan in the morning. AR Bible cards that bring the people in these stories up off the table. The Prayer Candle. Some shirts and hoodies. Whatever gets bought is what keeps everything else free for the people who cannot pay for it.

That is the entire pitch. If something here helped you and you want to stand with the work, that is how. If you cannot give anything, take all of it anyway. That is not a line, it is the arrangement.

SHARE THIS STUDY

If a session in here landed on somebody in your group, or on you at eleven at night when you could not sleep, send it to one person. Not a broadcast. One person you actually thought of while you were reading. That is how this work grows, and it is how most of the people reading this found it in the first place.

ONE LAST THING

You are not going to finish this month more impressive than you started it. That was never the plan. The clay does not become better clay. It stays soft, and it stays in the hands, and it comes out as something it could not have made itself.

Stay where he can reach you, and keep looking at him.

Onward, and God bless you.