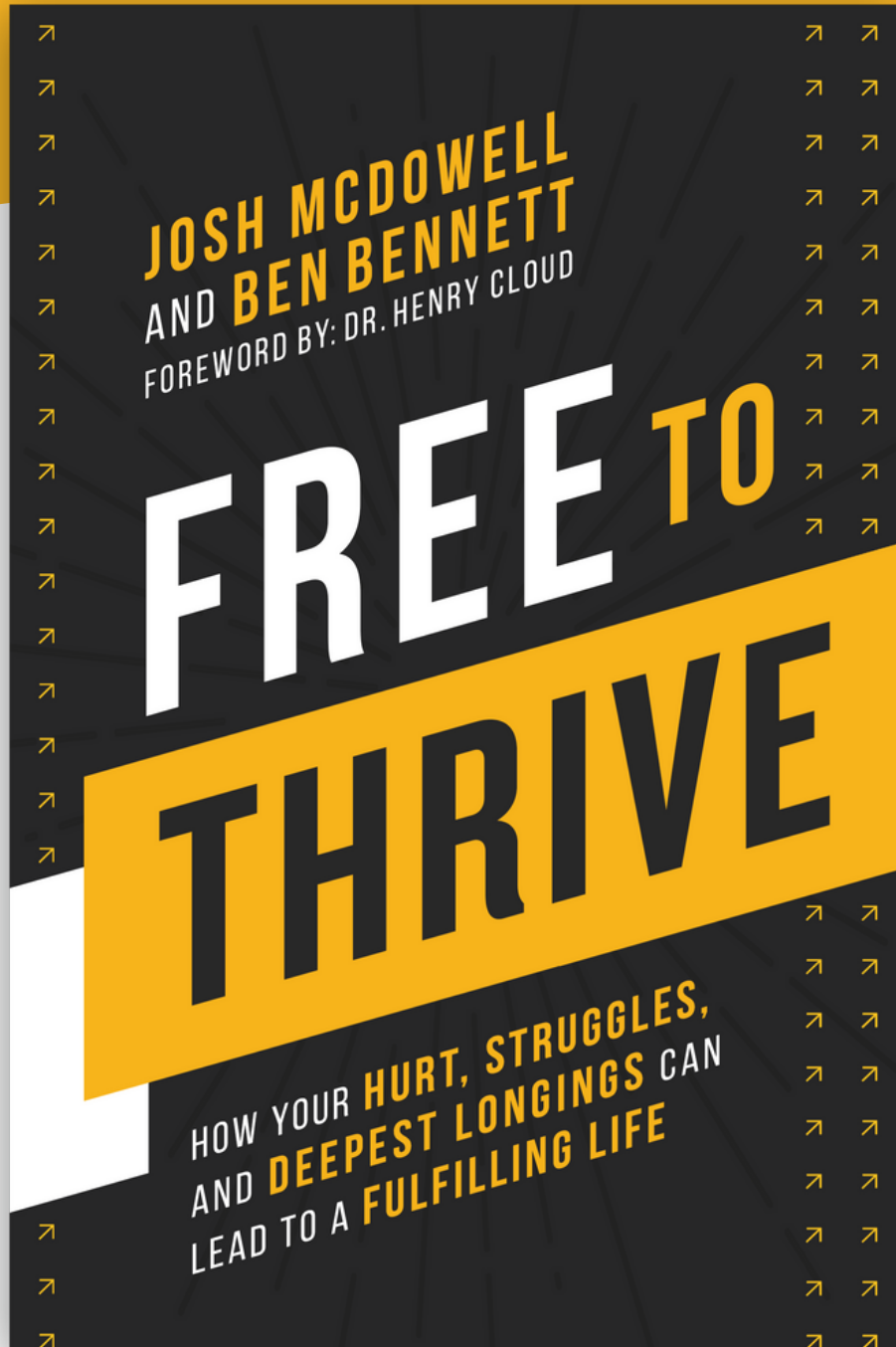


SERMON SERIES

BASED ON *FREE TO THRIVE*



4 WEEKS OF SERMON CONTENT!

Free to Thrive

SERMON OUTLINE 1

(Video Sessions 1 and 2)

I. Introduction

The ministry God had given Josh McDowell as a speaker, author, and Christian apologist was thriving. He had a team of people reaching the world. He'd written many books that sold millions of copies, spoken to millions of people worldwide, and seen thousands accept Jesus Christ into their lives. Josh and his team had conducted national campaigns to reach youth with the truths of Scripture and the life-changing message of Christ. He had a beautiful family and great relationships with his wife and kids. It seemed as if life couldn't get any better. But he knew that something wasn't right.

Josh McDowell felt constantly on the verge of emotional and physical exhaustion. He agreed to speaking and ministry opportunities for which he really had no time or energy. He said "yes" to helping people with their problems at his own expense. He found it nearly impossible to say "no," but had no idea why.

With the help of Dr. Henry Cloud, Josh came to grips with deep and lingering hurts from abuse in his childhood. Although he thought he had left them in the past, Josh had actually buried them alive. But he could never bury the deep unmet longings he felt for appreciation, acceptance, and safety. Instead, Josh sought to meet these longings in unhealthy ways such as a short temper and a deep desire to please other people at all costs.

II. Teaching

Maybe you've been stuck in unhealthy behaviors, thoughts, or relationship patterns. Perhaps you're experiencing unresolved hurts, shame, or struggles with your view of God. The pain and confusion that these struggles bring can be crippling. There is hope and there are real answers that can bring lasting freedom. God has more for you. You can experience a thriving life—one of spiritual, emotional, and relational health and wholeness.

You are not made to flounder and flail; you are made for more. You are made to thrive. Jesus offers you healing, health, wholeness, and true satisfaction.

A. LEGITIMATE LONGINGS

1) A Cocktail of Compulsions

You're not alone. We have all been plagued by unhealthy habits and unwanted behaviors. We return again and again to the same cycles, even as we desperately and

urgently want to change—whether it’s the way we treat our bodies, our priorities, secret sin, our relationships, or the “recordings” we play over and over in our minds. Whatever form they take, unwanted behaviors are inherent to the human condition. It’s a struggle that has plagued humankind since sin entered the world, and we know that the brokenness and incompleteness we feel is not how things should be. The early church leader, the Apostle Paul, confessed his own struggle around two thousand years ago:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. (Romans 7:15, 18–19 ESV)

You can hear the frustration in those words, can’t you? You can feel the weight of the back-and-forth struggle they express. Paul doesn’t understand his own actions. He doesn’t do what he wants. He keeps returning to what he hates. He has the desire to do what is right, but he finds himself unable to carry this out, continuing to do what he despises. Can you relate?

The truth is that it isn’t about behavior modification; it’s about heart transformation—the kind that Jesus wants to bring about in us as we address the deeper “why” of our hurts and struggles and identify our longings.

2) **God-Given Longings**

A longing, simply put, is a persistent craving to satisfy a God-given need or desire inherent to all people. Only when we understand the “whys,” the longings, behind our actions can we begin to walk into the freedom God has for us.

We long to have our God-given desires met. We feel satisfied and at peace being accepted, rather than rejected, by God and those around us. We enjoy knowing that people appreciate the things we do—a “thank you” is seldom met with anger. It feels good when people encourage us and affirm who God has made us to be with our unique gifts and talents, rather than tearing us down. These God-given longings are not weaknesses. They don’t mean we’re “needy”; they mean we’re human.

Our longing to have desires and needs fulfilled is beautiful. It’s at the core of who we are. God uses these longings to draw us to himself, to know him deeply and intimately. But our longings can also drive us away from him.

Proverbs 4:23 tells us, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” Everything we do in life flows from our hearts. All of our thoughts and actions are driven by the longings of our hearts, the things our hearts crave. And God blesses and affirms our longings. But we often seek to satisfy these legitimate, God-given longings in ways that bring destruction or pain, rather than pursuing things that truly

satisfy us. By understanding our longings, we can begin to understand how to find the true fulfillment we seek.

B. YOUR SEVEN LONGINGS

We know that there are deep caverns of cravings in our souls. We sense that there is something wrong, much that is unsatisfying, in the way we're living our lives. Whether we're desperate or just generally bothered, we know we need . . . something. But what?

What Everyone Wants

What are those needs that cause us to feel deprived when they're not met, and fulfilled when they are?

- **Acceptance:** Everyone longs to be accepted—to be included, loved, and approved of as you are, no matter what. When this longing is satisfied it makes each of us feel like “I’m valued.”

Those who have a personal relationship with God through salvation in Christ have experienced his gracious acceptance of us, just as we are, no matter what. (Romans 5:8 ESV).

- **Appreciation** is the longing to be thanked or encouraged for what you have done. When this longing is satisfied, it helps a person to believe that “I’m capable.” We long for acceptance, to know that our being matters, and we also crave appreciation—to know that our doing matters.

In Luke 17, Jesus cleanses ten lepers. Just one of ten said “thank you.” And that made an impression on Jesus. He was “in every respect like us” (Hebrews 2:17 NLT), so he felt the slight of the nine who showed no appreciation, and the blessing of the one who did.

Appreciation is a deeply felt human need. It works wonders when we receive it, and when we give it to others.

- **Affection** is the longing to be cared for with gentle touch or emotional engagement. It is another universal and acute human need. We all enter this world with a need to be cared for, touched, and engaged with emotionally. When we are, it produces a feeling of “I’m lovable.”

The Gospels repeatedly depict Jesus showing affection by speaking caring and honoring words and giving appropriate physical contact like a hug, a kiss, an embrace—even to his betrayer on the night of his betrayal (e.g., see Matthew 26:49; Luke 12:4; John 15:14–15). And the early church leader, Paul, repeatedly encouraged followers of Jesus to “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (2

Corinthians 13:12; see also Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 1 Thessalonians 5:26).

- **Access** is the longing to have the consistent emotional and physical presence of key figures. When this longing is satisfied, it gives us the feeling of “I’m important.”

God has implanted in every human soul a longing to know that we are important, and that need is met when we know that someone who is important to us is accessible to us and willing to be present with us. How beautiful it is that God gives us the gift of his Holy Spirit so that we need never feel alone in the boat, so to speak. But he also intends for our need for access to be met through others, which is why the Bible includes more than 150 “one another” statements that encourage God’s people to be available to each other (e.g., see Romans 12:10, 16; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Ephesians 4:32). Knowing that people we value are accessible to us teaches us that we are important and significant.

- **Attention** is the longing to be known and understood with someone entering your world (by this, we mean someone taking time to recognize and participate in what’s important to you such as your opinions, dreams, desires, and interests). When this longing is satisfied, it produces a feeling of “I’m understood.” Have you ever entered a full room or a building (or a church) without being noticed and greeted by anyone? Do you remember how that felt? It’s a lonely feeling, isn’t it?

Every human being longs to be seen, noticed, and understood. We all want someone to enter our world and pay attention to us. Our need for attention isn’t a need to be in the spotlight, so to speak; it is a heartfelt need for someone to notice who we are, what we’re interested in, what we’re going through, and what we’re capable of doing and being. And we all long for that and need that every day.

King David wrote, “O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me . . . Every moment you know where I am” (Psalm 139:1, 3 TLB). The Hebrew word that passage uses for “know” (*sakan*) means a caring involvement. God had much more than an informational knowledge of David; he was caringly involved in David’s life. God not only knows us and wants us to know him; he wants to be lovingly involved in our lives. In the ultimate display of love, he sent his Son into the world, into our world, as a human being, to share our trials, temptations, pains, and pleasures in a way that was beautifully designed to demonstrate his love for us and our importance to him. And he created us to need such attention in our lives, both with him and with those around us.

- **Affirmation of feelings:** Another need we all share as human beings is the longing to have our feelings affirmed, validated, or confirmed by others. When this longing is met, it conveys a sense of authenticity; it communicates, “I’m embraced.” Having our emotions affirmed frees us to feel both the emotional highs and lows of life, which is a big part of thriving. When someone acknowledges what we’re feeling, even if that feeling is negative, it has a positive effect, reassuring us that we’re not “weird” or “crazy” to feel the way we do.

A familiar story from the Bible contains an often-overlooked example of Jesus recognizing and meeting this need. It happened one day in the village of Bethany, when Jesus and his closest followers arrived at the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Martha leaped into action in the kitchen, to take good care of the Rabbi and his followers. But her sister, Mary, placed herself among his followers and sat at his feet to listen and learn as he taught.

Mary’s action rubbed Martha the wrong way. It was audacious for her little sister to act like she belonged among the men, as if she could be one of the Rabbi’s disciples just like them. But she also left Martha to do all the work of hostess and cook by herself! So Martha went to Jesus to complain.

“Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” (Luke 10:40).

Some people see Jesus’s reply as a rebuke. But notice that he carefully— and, I think, sensitively—affirmed Martha’s feelings: “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41–42).

Jesus’s words, both to Martha and about Mary, embody the truth of Romans 12:15, which says, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” As the New Living Translation puts it, “Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep.” When someone does this for us, affirming our feelings, we feel embraced and valued, and step further into the thriving life God desires for us.

- **Assurance of safety:** In addition to the longings we all feel for acceptance, appreciation, affection, access, attention, and affirmation of our feelings, we also feel a deep need for the assurance of safety—that is, to feel safe, protected, and provided for emotionally, physically, and financially. We crave more than just being told, “Everything is going to be okay.” We long for the assurance of our safety and security. We want to feel confident that we will be protected and provided for emotionally, physically, and financially.

When this longing is satisfied, it produces a sense of stability in our lives and the freedom to enjoy, explore, and experiment in life without fear. When this need is met, we have a feeling that says, "I'm secure."

We can find assurance in the simple truth that God exists and that he is our Creator and Sustainer. He has given us a longing for the assurance of safety and security that finds fulfillment in our relationship with him, the ultimate Father and Friend, Deliverer and Defender. As we live in relationship with him, living out the truths of his word that are rooted in his nature and character, we can know that we are provided for and protected by someone who is good and wants the best for us.

III. Application

Deep down, all of us want to be happy. We want to live satisfying lives, lives of joy and contentment.

Remember that it is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance. When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, God came after them. It was the radical love of the Father that said to them, "Where are you?" It was the redemptive heart of God that drove him to go after his creation. Similarly, God is pursuing us, wooing us, and inviting us in his kindness, not his disappointment, to turn toward him and toward change. He is turning toward us, and he is turning us toward him.

God is saying, "Where are you?" Come out of hiding. He's not ashamed of you; he loves you; he wants you. He will never abandon you. He wants a relationship with you. His view of you trumps everyone else's. Receive his invitation to be met with healing, grace, and forgiveness.

He created you for wholeness. He created you to reach your potential, to live your life on purpose, to know him and make him known. God created you to find true freedom from bondage and experience true fulfillment, to be free to thrive and enjoy a satisfying life.

Free to Thrive

SERMON OUTLINE 2

(Video Sessions 3, 4, and 5)

I. Introduction

The first crisis in human history occurred after God created Adam and surrounded him with every possible resource he might need, except for one: “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’” (Genesis 2:18). Human aloneness was a crisis, an undesirable situation that God took extreme measures to correct. Adam had all he could want in that pristine garden, including the presence of God himself. But God is a relational God who made us for relationship, not only with him but also with other human beings (Genesis 1:26).

We all have needs that can be met only through our relationships with God and other people. A flourishing life can happen only in connection with God and others.

II. Teaching

We live in a fallen world, a broken world, in which our God-given longings often go unmet. We experience loss, grief, pain, and betrayal. People who are supposed to be there for us let us down. Those who are supposed to love us the most often hurt us the most. After all, we are imperfect people interacting with other imperfect people.

A. YOUR UNMET LONGINGS

1) *David’s Dark Chapter*

The Bible records many memorable episodes in the life of David, the giant-slayer, court musician, and shepherd-king of Israel. He was a brilliant and compelling leader, and a passionate lover of God, but he had failings, like we all do, and he had almost constant trouble with his family.

- When David was a boy, King Saul’s son, Jonathan, was next in line to take the throne of Israel, but God had other plans. God sent the prophet Samuel to choose a king from among the sons of a man named Jesse. When Samuel arrived, he looked over Jesse’s sons, but none were who God had appointed to be the next king of Israel. Samuel asked Jesse if he had any more sons; Jesse responded, “Well, yes, there’s the runt. But he’s out tending the sheep” (1 Samuel 16:11 MSG). The Hebrew word Jesse used to describe his son (“runt,” MSG), means young, small, insignificant, unimportant. Apparently,

Jesse assumed that David wasn't worth presenting to Samuel! Samuel told Jesse to fetch this son anyway, and when he arrived, the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one" (1 Samuel 16:12). David, the seemingly insignificant and unimportant son of Jesse, would be the next king of Israel.

- As David's story unfolds throughout Scripture, we see a man faced with many more unmet longings and unwanted behaviors. We see him facing further attacks from Saul, who was jealous of David. We see him summoning another man's wife to his bed and arranging for the husband's death. We see him taking many wives and fathering numerous sons in his search for power and control. And through it all, in one family incident after another (the rape of Tamar by her brother Amnon, the killing of Amnon by his brother Absalom, etc.), David's response or failure to respond may have continued and worsened his and his family's dysfunctional patterns.
- Things got worse for David (2 Samuel 16:5-14). He'd been wounded by his own father. He'd been hunted by Saul. He'd lived in caves while the king sought his life. He'd mourned his best friend Jonathan's death— and Saul's too. He'd been exposed as an adulterer and murderer. He'd lost a child. But now his own son had betrayed him. His own son sought not only to dethrone him, but to kill him! He'd been driven from his city, separated from his family, betrayed by his closest friends, stripped of his kingly splendor, and exiled from his royal city. And then, to top it off, some sorry protestor comes along and starts throwing rocks and dirt and curses at him.

2) ***Attacks and absences***

You may never face an armed rebellion led by your own child, but chances are you've experienced the sting of a longing in your heart and soul that went unmet; it may not have been as severe or sustained as what David suffered, or it may have been even worse. Our unmet longings are scattered throughout the course of our lives, ranging from simply not being invited out to dinner with friends to something as painful as an abusive parent or spouse. Some are rooted in our childhood traumas, of course, and others can have later sources.

Both attacks and absences can hurt deeply. Attacks and absences always leave us with unmet longings, whether fleeting or lasting. A single attack of high intensity, such as being sexually or physically abused, can cause a lifetime of pain. However, so can attacks that are less intense, such as being ridiculed and called names on a childhood playground or being singled out and ostracized for your race or gender. These can also inflict a lifetime of hurt upon our souls.

Similarly, the pain of unmet longings may follow one-time absences of high intensity, such as a parent missing our biggest football game of the year, being stood up by a date, or a parent deserting the family. But enduring or recurring absences, such as a parent being emotionally unengaged, being excluded from important office meetings, or hardly ever feeling affirmed or approved of by significant people in our lives can also leave a deep and lasting wound.

As uniquely created individuals, of course, we all respond to attacks and absences differently. Something that devastates one individual may have little effect on another.

The pain caused by our unmet needs—legitimate needs, God-given needs— can be devastating. It might prompt us to wonder where God was, where he is, and why he let such things happen. We can wonder if he actually cares and if he has anything to say to us in our struggles. And we are not alone in such moments. Even King David, as he grieved his son’s rebellion and faced one of the darkest moments of his life, cried out (Psalm 3).

The effects of our unmet needs, the results of attacks and absences in our lives, can feel unbearable at times—but our stories aren’t over. God mourns and cries with us (John 11:35). He is close to the brokenhearted. God never wastes our pain and suffering if we allow him to use it. He promises to use even our darkest chapters to bring resolution to our stories and make us more like himself (Romans 8:28–29). He never uses our past to shame us but will use it to shape us. He promises to develop endurance, character, and hope in us (Romans 5:3–5). He promises to restore us and make us strong and steadfast (1 Peter 5:10), bringing us more and more into lives of wholeness.

Whatever pain, hurt, and unmet longings we experience, we can take heart because Jesus has already overcome the world. Our battles are temporary, and one day when we see Jesus face-to-face, in a place even greater than Eden, it will outweigh every unmet longing.

B. IDENTIFYING THE UNWANTED

Futility and Failure: As a boy author Ben Bennett had a legitimate need, a longing for attention, especially from those closest and most important to him. When this longing was frustrated, he felt rejected, neglected, and misunderstood. So Ben tried to cope with those feelings—by lashing out in anger, by seeking popularity in the hope that others would notice him and know him, and by consuming pornography.

Ben Bennett soon found himself stuck in the cycle that the first-century writer Paul described: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Romans 7:15).

Can you identify with that sentiment? That frustration? Have you found yourself struggling with unwanted behaviors and not knowing why? Maybe you’ve tried to address

some unhealthy choices—such as abusing drugs or alcohol, binge eating, or over-spending—by simply “trying harder to do better.”

Many of our unwanted behaviors are what the Bible calls sin. At the core, sin is wrong because it goes against God’s character. It goes against his honesty, righteousness, love, and truth. It hurts God, ourselves, and others. It leads to disconnection and alienation. Whatever your story is and whatever unwanted behaviors you turn to, it is important to know that there is more behind your sin than the nature all humans are born with. We have all sinned, done wrong, and found ourselves in a state of alienation from God. Have your unwanted behaviors left you experiencing a sense of separation from God? Are you feeling like God is distant and waiting for you to get your act together before he shows up? Have you felt stuck, experiencing feelings of frustration at everything you have tried without much movement or lasting change?

If you are looking for a breakthrough and people who can relate with you in your unwanted behavior, look at Paul’s words to the church in Ephesus, where Paul invites and urges his friends to listen and walk in the life of God as individuals and a community. In Ephesians 4:17-24, Paul shows us the progression of any unwanted behavior or sin in our lives. He was writing to believers in Jesus Christ, but he compared their state to that of non-Christians. It’s a mistake to think that if people come to faith, they’re immune to unwanted behaviors and compulsive patterns. True, when someone becomes a Christian, that person is reconnected with God, but Paul’s words suggest that a Christian can be in Christ and yet “separated from the life of God”—separated from the goodness, closeness, and satisfaction that a close personal relationship with God brings. This is the life of God, the life he intended for us to experience in the Garden of Eden which we were designed for. He says, “I’ll tell you this and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do.” His comparison of the “Gentile” ways of life with the way of Jesus reveals that there is the possibility for a Christian to return to former ways of living.

Paul describes this old way of life as one of being “separated from the life of God,” being “darkened in their understanding,” experiencing a “hardening of their hearts” with a loss of “sensitivity.” He sums up this former way of living as “futility in their thinking.” Could it be that there are ways, in our lives, in which we also get caught up in this old, futile cycle? That we experience disconnection from the life of God and therefore experience unmet longings, growing darkened in our understanding as we believe lie after lie about God, ourselves, and others? That we develop a loss of sensitivity as we numb our pain by indulging in unwanted behaviors?

Maybe your unmet longings, unwanted behaviors, and futile attempts to change your behaviors have left you feeling even more numb. Paul goes on to unpack this reality in Ephesians 4:19, saying, “Having lost all sensitivity.” The word “sensitivity” can also mean “feeling.” In other words, the “life of God”—which includes connection, vulnerability, and all

the things that are healthy and restorative—is lost. We lose all sense of the wholeness we crave. Separation from this “life of God” leads only to lifelessness and pain. We lose touch with vulnerability. We can’t feel our feelings. We feel numb.

We cannot reconnect with life any other way than by reconnecting with the “life of God,” which is relational at its core. There is no long-term solution that is not relational. You cannot do it alone. You were not meant to. Take the first step into hope and healing. Open your arms and embrace reality, so you can begin to grow into who God has made you to be.

C. LISTEN TO YOUR LONGINGS

More Than Our Nature: We agree with what Jesus and church leaders have taught for centuries, that we are born with a broken nature and, like every other human being, we have transgressed against a perfect and holy God (Romans 3:23). We live by our own rules. We love created things more than the Creator. We hurt ourselves and other people. Even the good we do is often done with mixed motives. We are born into this brokenness, experiencing the opposite of wholeness.

Despite all of these things, we are not worthless. We do bad things and we commit evil acts, but that doesn’t change the fact that we are made in the image of God. We have inherent value and worth since we are the pinnacle of God’s creation. Whether or not we have a personal relationship with Christ or call him our Lord, we still have infinite worth.

However, when we give our lives to Christ he adopts us into his royal family and calls us his own. He makes us righteous, blameless, and clean, forgiving us of all our sin—past, present, and future. He restores us to a similar state that the first humans experienced in Eden—having the full ability to choose to follow him, and to do good or bad. He comes to dwell inside us and empowers us to choose not to sin and to live in wholeness. His power gives us both the desire and the ability to pursue the fulfillment of our unmet longings in healthy and satisfying ways (Philippians 2:13). What amazing news! Imagine a world where people lived according to these beliefs. What a beautiful world filled with goodness that would be!

III. Application

As we start to understand our unmet longings and the hurts in our hearts, God invites us into healing and freedom as he meets those longings in healthy ways. He invites us to seek the fulfillment of our longings in something that will truly satisfy our hearts rather than cause our wounds to fester and remain unhealed by coping mechanisms, which ultimately lead to more pain and deeper infections of the soul.

God often brings healing over time rather than in an instant; healing is usually a process, not a single event. He does this as he helps us unlearn certain thought processes and unhealthy ways of

coping, and he empowers us by the Holy Spirit to walk in new ways.

Our unmet longings lead to unwanted behaviors. By understanding the unmet longings driving the unhealthy thoughts, patterns, and behaviors we want to change, we can begin to seek the fulfillment of these longings in healthy ways rather than destructive ones. By helping us understand the deeper issues behind our problems, Jesus can lead us to solutions to both.

Free to Thrive

SERMON OUTLINE 3

(Video Sessions 6, 7, and 8)

I. Introduction

In February 2014, author Ben Bennett woke to an overpowering weight beyond all sadness he had ever experienced before. Bennett described it this way, “I felt as if I was living in the depths of hell. I looked out the window, distressed, and thought, *Why am I feeling this way? How do I make it stop? God, what is going on?*”

Gloom, exhaustion, worthlessness, hopelessness, and horror hit him like a tidal wave. Tears flowed, almost nonstop. The turmoil continued for days. He had experienced depression off and on throughout his life and had endured abuse, assault, addiction, and more, but never anything like this.

This pattern of despair, although it had never been this pronounced before, had actually been developing for years at a subconscious level. It had started when Ben was a boy. He seldom felt loved and accepted for who he was. In fact, Ben Bennett felt hated. Consequently, he developed a negative core belief that there was something wrong with him.

II. Teaching

More often than not, these patterns are taking place at a subconscious level. They are the default patterns people are living out of because they developed them early, even in childhood. Their spirit and core identity may have been transformed by Christ, but they haven’t put off the old self (Ephesians 4:22) and put on the new self (Colossians 3:10). They have not fully experienced the newness of life that Christ offers (Romans 6:4). They haven’t been transformed by the renewing of the mind (Romans 12:2). Many continue to live reactively, repeating old patterns, rather than proactively developing new patterns in Christ.

A. WHAT YOUR BRAIN NEEDS YOU TO KNOW

1) The Battle of the Brain

God has a lot to say about the beautiful gift of our minds. The Bible mentions the words “mind,” “think,” “believe,” and variations of those words over 580 times in the English Standard Version (ESV) alone. Throughout these mentions is a huge emphasis on where we are to put our mental energy. Colossians 3:2 tells us to set our minds on things above. Philippians 4:8 tells us to think about things that are true, noble, right, and pure.

Romans 12:2 tells us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Another important passage depicts our minds as battlefields:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete. (2 Corinthians 10:3–6)

The battles we must fight against unhealthy beliefs and unwanted behaviors are spiritual battles that take place primarily in our minds. Why is so much attention given throughout Scripture to what we are to do with our minds? Because our behavior follows our beliefs. The way we think influences what we do.

We see this in Ephesians 4:23–24, which tells us “to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” Paul encourages us to first change the attitude of our minds, or the way we think, and to then take action—to put on the new self, to live into the ways of righteousness that are consistent with who we are in Christ. Our behaviors will follow what we truly believe.

Every day we see our behaviors following our beliefs. If you believe you’re going to get a paycheck as a result of working hard at your job, you’ll probably keep at it. As you continue working and consistently get a paycheck, the belief that you’ll be paid for your work solidifies and your behavior will follow. If you believe the weather app on your phone is generally accurate (whether or not that belief is well founded), you will take an umbrella with you when rain is in the forecast. If you believe your office or school chair will support you when you sit, you will do so without checking it first.

We all have beliefs that influence what we do. Those beliefs become hardwired into our brains over time.

2) **Behavior Follows Belief**

As we go throughout our lives, the lies we believe are triggered by our circumstances. Your boyfriend or girlfriend breaks up with you. Your boss criticizes you. An overwhelming task is handed to you. A friend disagrees with you. The kids refuse to listen to you. Your longings go unmet—again—and those unmet longings trigger your negative core beliefs. They feel so real and true in the moment. When this happens, you want to escape the stress and pain as quickly as possible; you want to feel better. You attempt to have your longings met in an unhealthy way.

Our unwanted behaviors are not just a sin issue, a hurt issue, or an unhealthy pattern issue. Our unwanted behaviors quickly become a brain issue.

Whether you realize it or not, you've developed fixed ways of thinking and acting for all your life. You have deeply embedded ways of making sense of the world around you. God wired you this way so that you could function efficiently and effectively at the numerous choices you make on a daily basis. Consider your morning routine, for example. You wake, open your eyes, move your arm, turn off the alarm, throw back the bedcovers, sit up, stand, walk to the bathroom, turn on the light, walk to the sink, pick up the toothbrush, open the toothpaste and squeeze it onto the toothbrush, turn on the faucet, wet the toothbrush, lift the brush to your mouth, open your mouth, and so on—just to brush your teeth! But you don't think about those individual and disparate decisions and actions. You've done each one many times before, so your brain and body perform as if on autopilot without consciously thinking through those decisions— or the thousands (millions, even) of decisions you make throughout the day.

Most of those decisions have been hardwired into your brain to free you to think and make other decisions.

Those “autopilot decisions” are beautiful and amazing when they involve healthy (or neutral) things, such as walking, eating, looking both ways when we cross the street, etc. But when our unmet longings and negative core beliefs lead to the development of such autopilot responses, they turn into habitual, unwanted behaviors that need to be addressed.

3) Hope for Your Brain

In spite of the negative core beliefs that have been embedded in our souls and the unwanted behaviors that have rewired our brains, there is great news. Just as God created our bodies to fight infections, he designed our brains for healing as well. The Bible affirms God's power—and the part we can play—to transform our brains: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

While our identity in Christ never changes, our minds can be renewed and reprogrammed. Our negative core beliefs and unwanted behaviors can be overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit as we develop new core beliefs based on biblical truth.

When we take steps to renew our minds, God uses every little thought and action to transform our lives by his power, which science affirms.

As we focus on the truth of who Christ is and who we are, and learn to experience and counter the lies with those truths, confronting and challenging them with God's Word, we can renew our minds and overcome our unwanted behaviors.

B. YOU'VE GOT THE WRONG GOD

The way to experiencing the deepest fulfillment of our longings, overcoming unwanted behaviors, and thriving in life is to understand and experience God for who he truly is as an engaged loving Father who wants to satisfy our deepest longings in healthy ways. While we need others to meet our longings, God is the primary source; he often meets our longings through other people, but he also does so through our personal relationship with him. When others fail, he doesn't. When longings go unmet in relationships, we can always trust him to meet our longings. He will always accept us, show his love to us, be available to us, and so on, through our personal relationship with him. We need others to meet our longings, especially as children, but we are created to have a healthy balance between God meeting our longings directly and through the agency of others around us. We were created to experience spiritual wholeness, the completeness that comes from knowing and experiencing God for who he truly is.

1) Do You Have the Wrong God?

Maybe you've had negative core beliefs about who God is. Maybe you know (intellectually, at least) that God is loving, forgiving, and always there for you, but deep down you struggle to believe this. Maybe intellectually you believe that Jesus truly meant it when he said "it is finished," and that he once and for all purchased salvation, a new identity, and forgiveness for you, but you find yourself hustling for your worth and seeking the approval of others.

Maybe, deep down, you think that God is always angry with you, walking around with a cosmic two-by-four waiting for you to mess up so he can punish you. Maybe you think that God hates fun—that he is a prude, a cosmic killjoy who gave humanity a bunch of pointless and impossible-to-follow rules. Maybe you see God as someone who created the world and then stepped away—someone who is disengaged from his creation and generally unconcerned with your pain and suffering.

These views about God are toxic to our wellbeing and prevent us from thriving in life. Fulfillment in life comes from knowing our Creator, experiencing his love for us, and understanding his intention for us to flourish.

God created us and designed how we are to live and thrive in this world. If we have a distorted view of God, our beliefs and behaviors will be distorted as well. If we have a low view of the Creator, we can't help but have a low view of the created. We will struggle with our worth, purpose, and direction in life. We may also view others as angry, distant, or not safe. We will struggle to grow, experience happiness, and live life to the full.

2) A God Who Knows What It's Like

Maybe, as a result of the suffering, tragedy, or abuse you have experienced, you've concluded that God doesn't exist. Surely, if he did, he wouldn't have let such things happen to you. Or maybe you believe there is a God but that he isn't good; otherwise, he would have prevented these things from happening. There are no easy answers to the thoughts and questions prompted by deep and lingering pain. But God knows what it is like to suffer, to be betrayed by his closest friends, to be publicly humiliated, abandoned, abused, beaten and whipped beyond recognition, and executed for crimes he did not commit.

God is not ignorant of or indifferent to the pain and hardships that come with being human. He walked among us in the person of Jesus Christ. He faced greater suffering, trauma, and unmet longings than anyone in world history. He sympathizes with us. While Jesus was fully God when he walked this earth, he was also fully human, wired with Seven Longings (acceptance, appreciation, affection, access, attention, affirmation of feelings, assurance of safety) like the rest of us. He felt deeply. He continues to feel deeply.

He weeps when we weep. He knows what pain is. He knows how bad it can be. He can handle our doubts, questions, and fears. And one day he will put an end to all hurt, evil, pain, and suffering. Justice will be served, and wrongs will be made right.

3) God Loved You before You Took Your First Breath

Many people, young and old, don't realize that God loved them even before they became Christians. While we were in darkness, when we were still enemies of God, he loved us and died for us (Ephesians 5:8, Romans 5:8). He loved us first (1 John 4:19). He did not wait for us to clean up our act. He did not wait for us to meet his expectations. He did not wait for us to make him proud. He simply loved us. Not only that, but he showed his love for us. He is not the kind of father who has trouble hugging a child or saying, "I love you." He is not the kind of father who has "more important things to do." He loves us foremost (Romans 8:32). He spoke his love for us with the Word (John 1:14). He showed his love to us on a cross. He wrote his love for us in blood.

The Father not only loves us first and foremost, but he also loves us forever (Jeremiah 31:3). The Father's love for us is complete, constant, and unconditional. We cannot earn it. We cannot escape it. We cannot erase it. He may be disappointed in our actions when we disobey him, or saddened when we stray from him, or sorrowful when we sin, but he never, never, never stops loving us. These things grieve his heart because they disconnect us from closeness to him, not because he is uptight about our behavior. Our Father's unconditional love for us is such that "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor

depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39).

C. Seeing Yourself as God Sees You

Do you have a photo of your spouse, significant other, or children as your phone background, eager to show them off at the first opportunity to anyone and everyone? What about your driver’s license photo? Do you delightedly show it to others? Pass it around at parties? Copy it to your online profile? Or do you cringe every time you see it? Do you pray for the day when you’ll renew your license in the hope that the photo will be at least a little better? Why is that? Is it because the Department of Motor Vehicles seems skilled at taking the worst possible photos? Okay, maybe it’s that. But it may also be that your driver’s license photo doesn’t represent what you really look like.

Each of us carries another personal identification photo, one that is far more important than any photograph in our phone, wallet, or purse. It is a mental self-portrait, our concept of who we are. Like your driver’s license photo, your inner self-portrait may or may not accurately represent the real you. Just as the quality of a photograph is diminished by lack of focus, poor lighting, or faulty camera settings, your inner self-portrait may be inaccurate due to faulty or incomplete input and distorted programming you’ve received about who you are.

All of the unmet longings we’ve experienced can lead to negative core beliefs about ourselves. Throughout life, especially in our early years, we look to people’s actions and words to determine our significance and value. Over time we buy into what people say or communicate to us about our worth, which can lead to a distorted view of ourselves. Maybe for you it was being bullied or rejected by others. Maybe others approved of you when you performed well but didn’t approve of you when you failed. Maybe you weren’t allowed to express your opinions, or you felt largely ignored. Any of these scenarios, intentional or not, can convey a lack of value, leading us to develop negative core beliefs about our worth and leading to shame—believing “I am bad” or “something is wrong with who I am.” As much as we may “know,” intellectually, that we are loved and valued for who we are, we struggle to “own” that reality. Even though we may receive compliments or kudos from others, these seem to roll off our backs rather than meeting our needs.

We need to seek the help of God and others for our unwanted behaviors, and we need to have a plan and receive support as we put the plan into action. But instead of being hyper-focused on a particular behavior, we need to understand our unmet longings and negative core beliefs that contribute to those unwanted behaviors. We need to take those thoughts captive and make them obedient to the truth of Christ. We need to believe the truth of who we are and live according to our true identity. The more we do this, the more our behavior will align with the truth, unwanted behaviors will lose their appeal, and we will

experience the emotional wholeness we were created for: the completeness that comes from knowing and experiencing our God-given value and identity.

1) A Case of Mistaken Identity

Our sense of identity can be negatively affected when we hear ourselves referred to as “converted sinners.” After all, we don’t call a butterfly a “converted caterpillar.” It’s a butterfly now; the old is gone, the new has come. When we trust Christ, we become new creatures. Old things pass away, and all things become new (see 2 Corinthians 5:17).

Many fear what would happen if people stopped seeing themselves as “converted sinners” and regarded themselves as “saints” (Ephesians 5:3 ESV). Would they become prideful and arrogant? Would they disregard God’s commands because they know they’re loved and forgiven and God delights in them no matter what? Would they sin all the more because their shame would no longer inhibit them? Not likely, instead, they’d have a more intimate personal relationship with God, make a greater impact in the world, and desire to obey God because they have experienced how much he loves them and cares for them.

2) Worthless?

People with a clear view of their true identity feel significant. They understand that they matter to God and to others, and that the world is a better place because they are here. They are able to interact with others and appreciate their worth without feeling threatened. They radiate hope, joy, and trust because they are secure in their identity as God’s children. They accept themselves as lovable, worthy, and competent members of God’s creation, redeemed and reconciled to God to become all he wants them to be. However, those with a cloudy view of their identity as God’s creation display a number of debilitating traits. The most common ways a clouded identity manifests itself is through the negative core beliefs of being worthless, unlovable, or just a face in the crowd.

Maybe you’d say that “worthless” is too strong of a word for what you feel, but you believe that you aren’t good enough—you feel inadequate, insecure, insignificant. Welcome to the club. Ever since shame entered the world, doubts about our worth have plagued all of us. We get caught in the shame hustle—fighting to get some sense of value from status, relationships, material possessions, and achievements. Trying to perform to get our worth from anyone—whether it’s ourselves, God, or other people—will always end in futility. Performance is the essence of manmade religion, which teaches you to do good in an attempt to be loved by God. But Christianity teaches that since we are already loved by God, we do good as a result. We don’t do good in order to

earn God's love; the good we do is the product of having received God's love, along with the result of his Spirit living within us.

Think: if we could get identity from our performance, then Jesus died in vain. Jesus's mission on earth was to live the kind of perfect life we could never live, fully obeying the Father, and to die, taking the punishment and separation from God that we deserved as a result of our rebellion and sin. Jesus took the blame for our sins, took our shame upon himself, and paid the price to achieve the approval of God for us. It's done. Through Jesus, we can be fully loved and fully approved of by God.

III. Application

You may have grown up feeling ignored, unwanted, despised, or even hated. The people who conveyed that image to you were in error. God created you in his image and loves you as his own child. God makes no mistakes. If he loves you—and he does—you are eternally lovable. It is essential that you see yourself as lovable because that is how God sees you.

Jesus didn't endure rejection, ridicule, torture, and death for the sake of trash. In love, he went to the cross to redeem and restore a relationship with that which was lost—you. One of the most well-known verses in Scripture shows how great his love for you is, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son . . ." (John 3:16). God doesn't merely tolerate or love you as a result of Christ's work on the cross. Rather, his love was the fuel that sent Jesus to the cross for you.

As you live according to and grow into who God has already made you to be, it will take a conscious effort to remember your true identity. You are not unlovable. You are not worthless. You are not the sum of what people have said or done to you. You are made in the image of God with infinite dignity and value, and you are loved. You're not defined by what you've done to someone, by what you've done to yourself, or by what's been done to you. You're defined by God and the identity he has given you as his beloved son or daughter. Rest in your value as an image bearer and your identity as a son or daughter who has been adopted into God's family.

Whenever you feel inadequate, unloved, or like just another face in the crowd, begin asking what lie you're returning to or what untruth you're believing about yourself. Then take that lie captive and tell yourself who you truly are.

Dwell on who God says you are and how much he values you. Meditate on times in life where you have felt his love and experienced his acceptance.

Free to Thrive

SERMON OUTLINE 4

(Video Sessions 9, 10, and 11)

I. Introduction

Josh McDowell had buried a secret for a long time that he knew he needed to share with his wife, Dottie. At that time they had been married twenty-five years. He asked her if they could talk, so they sat down on the carpet in the living room. It was hard to get the words out.

For the second time in Josh's life, he was going to share with someone else his story of being sexually abused as a little boy. Trembling, he told her. "When I was a boy, from ages 6–13 years old, I was sexually abused, raped, and forced to look at homosexual pornography by the hired hand on our family farm." She immediately grabbed him, hugged him tightly, looked deeply into his eyes and said, "Honey! I am so sorry this happened to you. It's a good thing he's no longer alive or he'd have to deal with me! I love you so much!"

Josh felt relieved, accepted, and totally loved. She thanked him for sharing this, and then gently said something he never could have anticipated. She said, "I so appreciate you trusting me with your story. I am so proud of you, and so sorry you had to go through all of this. But, Josh, this is a profound message, and if you want to share it with the whole world, I firmly support you, because so many people have had to deal with this anguish and need to hear your story!" Josh McDowell was stunned. That was the last reaction he anticipated.

II. Teaching

What do you believe grows people most? This question has been asked to many people with countless answers heard. Relationships grow people the most—relationship with God, relationship with self, and relationships with others. Our relationships with other people form the rich soil for us to experience greater spiritual and emotional wholeness. That is, others have the ability to show us God's love and model his character. They have the ability to love and accept us, helping us to know and believe our true value and identity.

When we have healthy relationships with God, ourselves, and others in place in our lives, we begin to thrive because this is how we were designed. You were created to thrive. You were created to have your Seven Longings met in healthy ways, and when this happens you will thrive. You can then start operating out of healthy core beliefs about yourself, God, and others.

Why is this the case? We were created by a relational God. We were made to be fully known and fully loved. We were made to love, serve, support, and show the love of God to others. We

need others and others need us. We are relational, and relational wholeness is what furthers and supports our spiritual and emotional wholeness. And, as we are wounded in our relationships with others, we must be healed in our relationships with others.

A. You're Made for More

1) Relational Wholeness from a Relational God

What was the first crisis in human history? Many would point to Adam and Eve eating from the tree in Genesis 3:6—the entrance of sin into the world. This was a crisis, certainly, but it was not the first. The first crisis occurred in the previous chapter, Genesis 2, which records the words of God: “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). It was a crisis of aloneness. Didn't Adam have God right there with him? Yes, of course; God was with him in the garden, but God himself observed that Adam was alone. Adam had fellowship with God, but there was no one just like him to live life with. God's words in Genesis 2 make a statement about Adam's aloneness that reveals to us part of who God is and what it means to be made in his image.

We are made in the image of God, which means we have inherent dignity and value. We can overcome shame and develop healthy core beliefs about ourselves. But there is another dimension to being made in the image of God that we call relational wholeness, or the completeness that comes from experiencing healthy relationships with others. You were made by a relational God for healthy relationships.

Relationship is and always will be at the core of who God is. In both the Old and New Testaments, the Bible teaches that God is a Trinity. God exists as three persons, yet he is one being. Each person—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—has a separate identity while enjoying the same essence of nature as the others, not merely similar natures in different roles. Some might think this is confusing or contradictory. But the Bible's depiction of God as one God who eternally coexists as three persons conveys an amazing truth, showing us that intimate relationship has existed eternally. God didn't create humans because he needed a relationship; he already had relationship. He exists in relationship. The Father has always infinitely loved the Son, the Son has always infinitely loved the Father, and the Holy Spirit has always infinitely loved both the Father and the Son. A continuous cycle of perfect relationships is experienced within the Godhead. While we are unable to fully comprehend such a perfect and continuing relationship, all of us long to experience this kind of relationship ourselves. The image of God can be fully seen in us only through relationships.

Relationships are part of our core identity. God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.” He made humans in his image, and that image reflected the perfect relationship of the three persons of the Godhead: an infinitely loving oneness, a bonding, a togetherness, and a connectedness unparalleled in the universe. And he desired for his

human creation a oneness similar to his. So, instead of leaving his newly created man alone, he made another human from the man's side—Eve.

Just as God is in relationship by his very nature, so he creates us to be in relationship. God's unity in the Trinity is the key that unlocks how our relationships are meant to work. While we can never comprehend God's oneness in relationship in an absolute sense, we can gain enough insight into this mystery to experience the true meaning of relationship. Uncovering the mystery of the Trinity is like peering into the very heart of God.

Nothing in life can make more of an impact on you than a human relationship, or the lack of it. We are hardwired for relationship and connection from the time we are born; indeed, we can't even survive initially, let alone thrive, without human relationships. The opposite of thriving is living in isolation and disconnection from others. No thriving person is isolated and disconnected, and no isolated and disconnected person is thriving.

2) **Human Connection: Surviving and Thriving**

How important is human connection? Much research has been done on the importance of the role of a primary caregiver, which is typically a parent. One of the most famous studies is known today as the Still Face Experiment ("The Dynamic Still-Face Effect: Do Infants Decrease Bidding over Time When Parents Are Not Responsive?" *Developmental Psychology* 49, no. 6 (June 2013): 1027–35, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029330>), which paired infants with a primary caregiver. The adult would play face-to-face with the child, without toys, for three minutes before turning away momentarily and then looking back at the infant. Next, the caregiver was instructed to remain completely unresponsive, maintaining eye contact but making no facial expressions, for two minutes. Then the caregiver resumed play as before for three minutes.

The moment the caregiver turns away and becomes unresponsive, the babies immediately feel the shift from connection to disconnection, responsive play to unresponsive stare. Within the two "still face" minutes, the infants seem desperate to reconnect and get a response from the caregiver. They reach out, point, cry, scream, and kick. The disconnection and unresponsiveness throws the infant into a flurry of anxiety and distress, until the caregiver re-engages in play and reconnects with the child.

The Still Face Experiment reveals how important connection and relationship are to us as humans—and how destructive even two minutes of disconnection can be. God made us as relational beings, and our need for connection with others is apparent from the earliest moments of childhood. And, biblically speaking, our relationships—with God and others—are among the few things that endure beyond this life.

3) Relational Brokenness and Wholeness

Relationships are the birthplace of both beauty and brokenness. We are blessed by relationships when they are healthy and hurt by them when they're not (and even the best relationships can still hurt us). When we are hurt in relationships, we need to be healed in them by having our Seven Longings met in healthy ways.

Each of us was made to be fully known and fully loved within a relationship, both with God and with others. Like God, who in the Trinity is the ultimate example of three persons being fully known and fully loved, we were created with an inborn need to be fully known and fully loved. Since God is omniscient, meaning he knows all things (see John 21:17), he knows everything about each of us. He knows all of our secrets, thoughts, hurts, and longings. He knows all and still wants an intimate and personal relationship with us (see Romans 5:8).

Not only are we fully known by God, we are also fully loved when we are reconciled to God through a saving relationship with Jesus. The longing to be fully known and fully loved is met in our relationship with God, but just like Adam in the Garden we are also made to be fully known and fully loved by other people.

4) God's Plan for Your Growth

As we take steps toward wholeness, having our longings met, and seeking support from others, we begin to build a rich environment of healing and health. Such an environment can replace the view of yourself you have carried from childhood with the truth of who God has made you and called you to be. It is vital for you to be involved in an ongoing, loving, mutually supportive relationship with other believers. It may be in an adult Sunday school class, a neighborhood Bible study group, or a small group from your church. The group must be small enough that you can get to know a number of people on an intimate level. Merely sitting in a church for a few hours on Sunday morning does not allow for much relationship-building. Find—or help create—a small group where consistent, loving interaction reinforces the truth of who God says you are.

God has designed us to heal from hurts, overcome struggles, and thrive in life. He has designed us to grow into the persons he says we are. This can happen as we understand our unmet longings, work through the lies that have taken root, get support from others, and surround ourselves with a rich growth environment.

No matter the hurt you carry, the things you've done, or the lies you believe, God wants you as you are today. Jesus desires to forgive you and heal you. He wants you to experience rich relationships with him and other people. He desires for you to be fully known and fully loved. He wants you to be free to thrive. Will you take the step to be involved in a growth environment, and share with safe people the broken parts of your life and story?

B. What's True for Me Is True for You

We can say “what’s true for me is true for you” because truth is not a societal or cultural construct. It is not a created concept that can be altered. Truth is rooted in the nature of God. Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). We must look to Jesus to find out what truth is. Additionally, every one of us was created in the image and likeness of a relational God. Because of this, we all have an inherent design that causes us to thrive. We have longings that drive our actions. To say it another way: there is a universal way to wholeness and emotional health because we were created to live in relationship with God and one another—and not just in any kind of relationship, but in relational wholeness that fosters emotional and spiritual wholeness.

Try to build a house using your own standard of measurement. Pour footers haphazardly, cut joists according to your mood of the moment, and nail drywall wherever you like, independently of any code or standard. What kind of house will you build? A house that will not stand.

Construction of a reliable structure conforms to a universal standard of measurement. You don’t measure subjectively; you measure objectively. Every measured length, width, and height is in accordance to the universal standard that has been established by the International Bureau of Weights and Measures. When a six-foot-long board matches the six-foot mark on a measuring tape, which in turn conforms to the international standard for six feet, you can truthfully state that it is, in fact, six feet long. It is a correct and true length when it conforms precisely to the original or standard of measurement. When you build a house using objective standards, you’re more likely to have a house that will stand.

The Universal Standard of Truth

What is the standard, then, for universal moral truth? Jesus asserted it when he said, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). He is the one who defines and models emotional, relational, and spiritual wholeness. And it is his Word, the Bible, which communicates that universal moral truth to us.

Universal moral truth isn’t simply a preference or an abstract concept; it originates in a person who is the original and abiding standard for morality. Moral truth ultimately finds its source in a “who,” not merely in a “what.” In other words, moral claims are universally true if they correspond to the character of God, who is the objective source for morality. God is the Source of all moral truth. “He is the Rock,” Moses said, “his work is perfect . . . a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he” (Deuteronomy 32:4 KJV). God’s nature and character determine moral truth. He defines what is right and wrong, good and evil. But truth is not first and foremost something he decides; it is something he is.

The basis of everything we call moral, the Source of every good thing, is the eternal God who is outside us, above us, and beyond us. The apostle James wrote, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17).

The reason we have this concept that some things are morally right and others are morally wrong is not because a church propagates it or even that it is written in a book called the Bible. The moral authority of the Bible isn’t found in its commands and rules. The authority of Scripture is derived directly from and founded in the very character and nature of God and represented in the flesh through Jesus Christ. All moral truth resides in and comes from God.

The reason we think that there are such concepts as “fair” and “unfair” is because our Maker is a just God.

The reason honesty is right and deceit is wrong is because God is true.

The reason other-focused love is right and selfishness is wrong is because the God of relationships who formed us is a God of love.

Everything that is moral, right, and good flows from the nature of God. He directs us to follow in his ways, because his ways lead us down a path of wholeness and thriving. And when we see God as the source of all moral truth, it affects how we see the rules and laws that he gives us.

III. Application

What about you? Who do you say Jesus is? Each of us has an individual decision to make, a conversation to have with Jesus. It’s one of surrender or rebellion, friendship or alienation. When we die, we will stand before God, and those who have given their lives to Jesus and know him personally will spend eternity in heaven, a place of wholeness with no more tears, pain, or suffering. Those who don’t surrender to Jesus will suffer the consequences of their choice—an eternity apart from God and everything he is, everything good, pleasing, satisfying, and beautiful. But Jesus’s invitation, here and now, is for you. Who do you say he is? If you’ve yet to give your life to Jesus Christ, do so now! Will you weigh the evidence, consider Jesus’s love and purpose for you, and make a decision today?