The Building of Fellowship

Stone's Table

Ted Antrim

COPYRIGHT & CREDITS

Copyright © 2026 Ted Antrim. All rights reserved.

Original writing and stone photographs by Ted Antrim. Quoted material remains the property of its respective rights holders.

SCRIPTURE

Scripture quotations identified as NIV are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations identified as KJV are from the King James Version (Authorized Version) of the Holy Bible.

BOOKS REFERENCED

Jerry L. Sittser, A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss. Zondervan.

Craig Groeschel, Winning the War in Your Mind: Change Your Thinking, Change Your Life. Zondervan, 2021.

Sarah Young, Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence. Thomas Nelson. Devotional excerpt referenced in Lesson 05.

MUSIC REFERENCED

“Violin,” performed by Amos Lee, from Mission Bell.

Proof copy • November 2026. Final quotation permissions and publication details remain to be confirmed.

In Loving Memory of

Stone Walker Antrim



A Note to the Reader

The Building of Fellowship is a collection of stories, lessons, and reflections, each offering a different perspective on the experiences and wisdom that brought us together around Stone's Table.

The Lessons are the teachings I prepared for our Thursday gatherings. They were intended to encourage conversation, challenge our thinking, and explore the questions we encounter throughout life. Some were born from circumstances unfolding around us, while others drew upon experiences and lessons I had carried for many years.

The Stories were written after those gatherings, but their beginnings often reach much further into my past. They introduce the people, relationships, and experiences that shaped my understanding and help me explain the meaning behind the teachings. They offer the reader an opportunity to see not only what I wanted to share, but why those particular lessons mattered to me.

The Reflections offer moments to consider what those experiences revealed, what I came to understand, and sometimes what I am still learning.

At times, the stories and reflections are woven together.

These writings were not originally conceived as chapters of a book. The lessons were prepared for a table of young men, and the stories grew from a desire to share the experiences behind them.

Together, they tell a story that reaches beyond any single gathering—a lifetime of experiences finding their way into conversations, and those conversations becoming part of something we continue to build together.

Contents

Lesson 01 — The Beginning 1

Lesson 02 — Mandy's Sendoff — Montana Sunrise Chicken 23

Lesson 03 — The Violin 49

Lesson 04 — One Word — Around the Fire 81

Lesson 05 — When We Don't Have the Answers 97

Lesson 06 — Two Months — What We Carry Forward 123

Lesson 07 — The Weight We Carry 137

Lesson 08 — Finding Your Direction 159

Lesson 09 — What Does Loss Reveal? 187

Lesson 10 — Let Go Again 213

Lesson 11 — Isaiah 41 — Where Does Our Strength Come From? 229

Lesson 12 — The Rut, The Lie & The New Trench 251

Contents

Lesson 13 — The Rut, The Lie & The New Trench — Part 2: Carry Each Other's Burdens 277

Lesson 14 — The Rut, The Lie & The New Trench — Part 3: Handing Off the Weight 301

Lesson 15 — What Brings Excitement to Your Day? 323

Lesson 16 — What Will Be Better Because I Was Here? 351

Lesson 17 — What Are You Going to Better? 377

Lesson 18 — I've Got Your Six 397

Lesson 19 — Are You Owning Your Stone? 419

Lesson 20 — Slow Down. Think More. Think Deeper. 437

Lesson 21 — The Fellowship Carries On 453

The Silver Lining 493

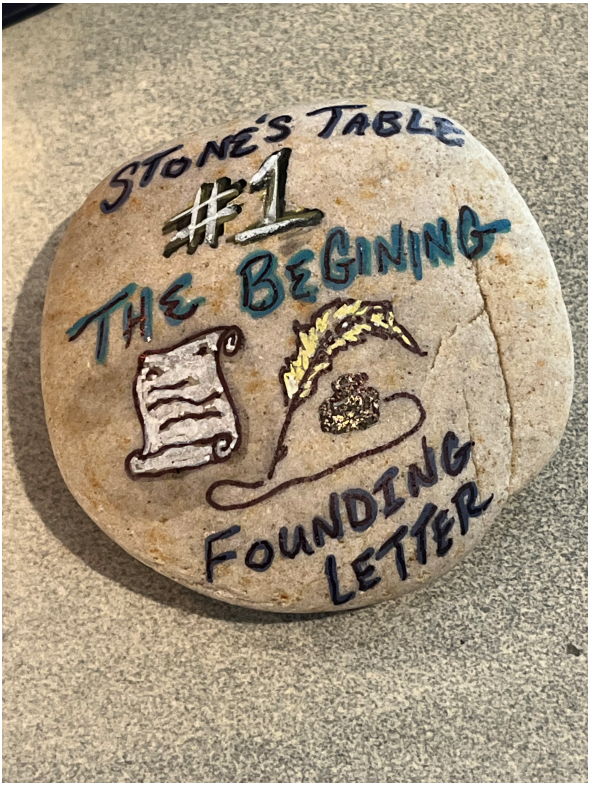
What Was on the Table? 499

The Golden Lining — From Texas to Mexico 503

An Open Chair 565

LESSON 01

The Beginning



THE ORIGINAL LESSON

Consider this officially logged as the founding entry of a new section within my Letters to the Future: The Ted Journals.

Section Title: Stone's Table – The Fellowship Project

Entry #1

Date: May 29, 2026

Stone's Table
The Fellowship Project
Entry #1 – The Beginning

There are things I know, and there are things I don't.

I know life is fragile.

I know none of us are promised tomorrow.

I know that one phone call can change everything.

What I don't know is why some people get more time than others.

What I don't know is why God allows certain roads to be walked.

Since Stone left us, I have found myself looking at the young men who stood beside him. His friends. The boys who laughed with him, worked with him, rode with him, and grew up alongside him.

I see myself in them.

I see fears they may not talk about.

I see questions they may not ask.

I see young men trying to figure out life in a world that often offers very little guidance.

My hope is to create a place where we can gather regularly. Maybe weekly. Maybe every other week.

A fire pit.

A meal.

A garage.

A cigar for those who can muster through a whole one.

Stories.

Questions.

Laughter.

Faith.

A place where nobody has to pretend they have it all figured out.

I don't claim to have all the answers. Truthfully, I carry my own fears, doubts, failures, and questions.

But I know this:

Young men need fellowship.

Young men need purpose.

Young men need older men willing to walk beside them.

And most importantly, I think young men need to know Christ.

If this gathering becomes anything at all, I hope it becomes a place where these boys know they are loved, valued, welcomed, and never alone.

If one young man finds hope.

If one young man finds direction.

If one young man finds a relationship with Christ.

Then every conversation will have been worth it.

This is the beginning.

We'll see where God takes it from here.

THE FIRST GATHERING

An Author's Reflection

Looking back, I realize Stone's Table didn't begin on June 4, 2026. At least, not entirely.

I believe the first stones of this fellowship were being laid on May 16, during Stone's Celebration of Life.

I remember standing at the podium, addressing everyone who had gathered to honor my son. I spoke about the young men who had grown up alongside Stone and Steel. Boys who had been a constant in our home for years. Angela and I had watched them grow, watched their friendships develop, and watched them become young men.

Our house had become a gathering place for them. Somewhere they could come and be themselves. Somewhere they were always welcome.

And I remember telling everyone that **I didn't want that to end.**

I can't recall my exact words. There is a video of Angela and me speaking that day, but I'm not ready to watch it. Someday, when the time feels right, perhaps we'll revisit those moments together. For now, I'm content remembering what I can.

What I do remember is stepping away from the podium and having many of those boys approach me.

There were hugs, tears, and even laughter as we talked about seeing one another the following week.

At that point, I hadn't given our gatherings a name. There was no Stone's Table. No prepared lesson. Certainly no book.

There was simply a father who didn't want to lose the young men who had become part of his family.

And there were young men who seemed to feel the same way.

I didn't recognize it then, but looking back, I believe something had already begun.

THE PREPARATION

By the time June 4 arrived, I wasn't sleeping much.

If I managed an hour of sleep that night, I would have considered myself fortunate.

I had spent much of the evening in the barrel room, watching the hours pass until the sun began to rise. Eventually, I made myself a cup of coffee, gathered Ranger and Scout, and headed outside.

I sat in my lawn chair with my feet planted on the ground, staring toward the same stretch of backyard and creek I had found myself looking at so many mornings before.

Thinking.

Praying.

Meditating.

Sometimes just staring.

Those early weeks remain somewhat of a fog. I can't honestly tell you everything that was going through my mind.

But I do remember feeling anxious.

And somewhere in that anxiousness, I began recognizing something else.

Excitement.

I knew that at seven o'clock that evening, at least one of the boys from Stone and Steel's circle would be walking through our front door.

There was comfort in knowing that.

I needed something to look forward to, and having those boys back in our home gave me exactly that.

Naturally, my attention turned toward the food.

I've always enjoyed cooking. Not simply throwing something together to fill everyone's stomachs, but preparing a meal worth sitting down for.

To me, cooking is almost an art form. You spend your time preparing something, working with flavors, getting everything just right, and then you get to watch people enjoy it.

It's a piece of art that gets to be digested, fully taken in.

And I wanted this meal to be special.

I wanted to prepare something Stone always enjoyed.

My smoked meat.

I can still picture him coming into the house after I'd spent the day smoking something.

He'd lift his nose into the air, take in the smell, shake his head a little, and say something like, "Gosh, that smells good. What are you cooking? Are you smoking something for us tonight?"

I loved that.

It was one of those simple exchanges between a father and son that you never imagine will someday become such a treasured memory.

I believe I'd started planning the menu a couple of days earlier.

Brisket.

Pork butt.

Pork tenderloin.

Everything getting a generous coating of my special black rub.

The day before, I'd torn down the smoker, removed the auger, cleaned out the old pellets, and prepared it for another season.

That had become something of an annual ritual between Stone and me.

Once I had everything reassembled, I ran a test.

The smoker was ready.

Before settling into the barrel room that evening, I remember placing the brisket in the smoker, setting my

probes, and working out a timeline for when the remaining meats would need to go on.

By morning, the smoker was already doing its job.

And as the day progressed, the smell was wonderful.

But there was something else happening during those preparations.

Something that had little to do with food.

SOMETHING ON MY HEART

I knew I wanted to feed these boys.

That part came naturally.

Angela and I had been welcoming them into our home for years. Feeding them, entertaining them, watching them laugh, and allowing them to build memories under our roof.

But somewhere along the way, while preparing for this first gathering, **I felt a calling on my heart to write something.**

I wanted to formally address these young men.

Not simply welcome them back into our home, but share what had been weighing on my mind and heart.

There were things I wanted them to understand. Things I believed were important. Thoughts about life, fellowship, faith, and the uncertainty of tomorrow.

And perhaps there were things I needed to say just as much as they needed to hear them.

So I decided to put pen to paper.

I didn't know how they would receive it.

I didn't know whether this gathering would become something regular or simply be one evening spent together.

But I knew I wanted to give them something more than a good meal.

I wanted to give them something worth carrying home.

THE BOYS ARE COMING

As the day progressed, I began wondering exactly how many boys would be joining us.

One?

Two?

A handful?

I really didn't know.

I remember sending a message to our group text, which I'd named **"My Pebble Stones"** on May 16, asking who was planning to attend.

I needed a headcount.

The responses started coming.

Thumbs-ups.

"I'll be there."

And then, naturally, the banter began.

Someone asked what time we were getting together.

Seven o'clock.

Someone else asked.

Seven o'clock.

And somehow, despite the time having already been mentioned several times, the question kept coming.

I remember smiling at the exchanges.

They were teasing one another, carrying on, and acting like the same group of boys I'd known for years.

And with every response, I began realizing something.

More than one or two boys were coming.

I felt excited.

Humbled.

Emotional.

I had hoped they would want to return to our home, but seeing their enthusiasm meant more to me than I could have explained at the time.

There was a part of me that wanted to provide something for them.

I wanted them to know that losing Stone didn't mean losing the home where so many of their memories had been made.

I wanted them to know that Angela and I still loved them, still welcomed them, and still wanted them around.

But there was another part of me that I can't overlook.

A part that might have seemed selfish at the time.

I needed them.

I needed those boys in my life.

I needed their laughter, their conversations, their familiar faces walking through our doors.

I needed the comfort of knowing that the friendships Stone had helped build weren't going to disappear.

And I knew Steel was going to need those friendships just as much.

THE FIRST HUG

If I recall correctly, Kurtis was the first to walk through the door that evening.

Tall, lanky, blond, with a scruffy face and wispy hair.

He looked worn out.

His shoulders were dropped, his posture slightly hunched, and he carried himself like someone who was simply exhausted.

Tired from a week of work.

And, I believed, tired from trying to navigate everything that had happened.

I remember him walking toward me and into my arms.

We held one another tightly.

He gently rubbed my back and told me he loved me.

There was so much compassion in that simple gesture.

I felt it.

And I believe he did too.

It was comforting and healing in a way that words alone couldn't have been.

But Kurtis wasn't the only one.

As the evening continued and the others arrived, nearly every one of those boys, if not all of them, embraced me.

And when they left later that night, those embraces came again.

There was an exchange of love happening in our home that evening.

I had opened the door hoping to offer them comfort, and they walked through it offering comfort to me.

DINNER IS SERVED

After spending the better part of the day tending to the smoker, it was finally time to bring everything inside.

I began pulling the meat and arranging it across our plywood countertops, which we'd covered with a blue plastic party liner.

I think a few of the pans may have even melted the blue plastic liner from the heat.

But the food looked wonderful.

And the boys were hungry.

Now, if you've ever put a countertop full of smoked meat in front of a group of hungry young men, you already know what's going to happen.

It doesn't matter how old they get.

They're going to start picking.

A finger reaches toward a piece of meat.

Someone smiles.

"Ooh, can I get a little of that?"

And before you know it, everyone's sampling something before dinner has officially started.

I loved watching them.

It was familiar.

It felt like home.

Before everyone began eating, I remember offering a prayer and blessing our dinner.

Then we ate.

Conversations started naturally. There was laughter, plenty of food, and the comfortable atmosphere I'd hoped we could preserve.

For a little while, our home was filled with the familiar sounds of those young men enjoying one another's company.

And I was grateful.

AROUND THE FIRE

Once dinner had wrapped up, I invited everyone outside.

It wasn't exactly bonfire weather.

It was hot and sunny.

But we lit one anyway.

I handed out cigars, and most of the boys joined me in having one.

We settled in around the fire.

And eventually, I told them I had prepared something I'd written and wanted to share.

This was the first official message of Stone's Table.

Lesson 01 — The Beginning.

I read what I'd prepared.

I spoke about how fragile life is.

How none of us are promised tomorrow.

How one phone call can change everything.

I spoke about the young men who had grown up alongside Stone and the importance of fellowship, purpose, guidance, and faith.

And I shared my hope that we could create a place where nobody had to pretend they had everything figured out.

When I finished reading, there was a brief silence.

Then the conversation began.

Not because I had some elaborate plan for leading a discussion.

It simply happened.

Questions were asked.

Comments were made.

Feelings were shared.

And the evening continued unfolding naturally.

I had prepared a message, but what followed belonged to everyone sitting around that fire.

AREN'T WE DOING THIS EVERY WEEK?

At some point that evening, I remember asking the boys how they envisioned these gatherings moving forward.

Should we get together once a month?

Every other week?

Maybe twice a month?

I wasn't entirely sure what to expect.

What I remember with certainty is **Austin being the first to speak up.**

There was an excitement in his voice, almost as though the idea of gathering any less frequently didn't make sense to him.

His response was essentially:

"Aren't we doing this every week?"

And then the others began chiming in.

It wasn't just Austin.

It wasn't one or two boys expressing interest.

It was all of them.

They wanted to gather every week.

I remember feeling humbled by that response.

I'd spent so much time wondering whether these young men would embrace what I was trying to create.

And here they were, telling me they wanted to make it a regular part of their lives.

I invited them to the first gathering. They invited themselves to the next.

I don't think I fully understood the significance of that moment while it was happening.

But looking back, I recognize it as the moment Stone's Table became something more than an idea I was hoping would work.

It became something we all wanted to build together.

WHEN THE HOUSE GREW QUIET

I believe the last of the boys left sometime around one o'clock in the morning.

I remember eventually heading upstairs, taking a shower, and lying down in bed.

I was exhausted.

Physically.

Emotionally.

Mentally.

But sleep still wouldn't come.

During those first weeks after losing Stone, I'd become afraid of sleeping.

When I did manage to drift off, I often found myself trapped in vivid, repeating dreams of May 9.

It was as though I was reliving that day over and over, with all the emotions and everything that followed somehow compounded into one endless experience.

There are details of those dreams that I'm not prepared to put into words.

And I don't believe I need to.

It's enough to say that sleep had become something I feared rather than something I looked forward to.

But that night, despite the exhaustion and the difficulty sleeping, I remember feeling something I hadn't felt much of in those early weeks.

Comfort.

I kept returning to the conversation around the fire.

To Austin's enthusiasm.

To the others joining in.

To the fact that these boys wanted to come back.

Not because they were obligated.

Not because Angela or I had asked them to make some commitment.

Because they wanted to.

There was something special about that.

And I knew I didn't want to let the opportunity pass without giving it serious thought.

I had no idea what Stone's Table would become.

I didn't know how many lessons I might eventually write, what conversations we would have, or how much I would find myself learning along the way.

But I knew one thing.

The boys were coming back.

And for the first time, I was beginning to understand that this fellowship wasn't something I would have to build alone.

LESSON 01



LESSON 02

Mandy's Sendoff — Montana Sunrise Chicken



THE ORIGINAL LESSON

Stone's Table Fellowship Project
Mandy Sendoff Dinner – June 10th, 2026
Montana Sunrise Pineapple Chicken #2
Menu

Pineapple-marinated smoked chicken breasts

Pineapple-marinated smoked chicken thighs

Pineapple rings smoked directly on each piece of chicken

Candied bacon

Cowboy caviar

Broccoli salad

Assorted BBQ sauces

Cherry pepper relish

I will absolutely save this one in my cooking library.

Not because it was technically perfect :)

Because it has a story.

And years from now, when someone says "Remember the dinner before Mandy left for Glacier?" you'll immediately remember the pineapple-topped chicken sitting in that smoker while I was fighting rain and a stalling smoker, clogged hoper, and the hour delay before serving the first plate and your hungry stomachs!

Some recipes become favorites because they're delicious.

Some become favorites because they mark a moment in life.

This one feels like the second kind. 🏔️☀️🍍🐔❤️

"Alright everyone, before we eat, we've got one order of business. This meal needs a name."

The finalists:

1. The Sweet Departure

2. Montana Sunsrise Pineapple Chicken^

3. Sweet Miles Ahead

4. Sweet Horizons

5. Home Is Here

The boys, Mandy, and everyone else cast a vote. But before hear me out as why I have chosen these names

What I especially like is that each name tells a slightly different story:

* **The Sweet Departure — focuses on the goodbye.**
* **Montana Sunrise Pineapple Chicken — focuses on the new adventure.**
* **Sweet Miles Ahead — focuses on the journey.**
* **Sweet Horizons — focuses on the future.**
* **Home Is Here — focuses on family and belonging.**

My guess? The group will gravitate toward Sweet Miles Ahead or Montana Sunshine Chicken, because they're hopeful and forward-looking rather than centered on the farewell itself.

BEFORE WE EAT: Few Words with a Prayer

"Tonight's meal is called *Montana Sunrise if thats what we decided*. We named it for Mandy. A sunrise means a new day, a new adventure, and a chance to heal. No matter how far away Montana may be, this table remains yours, and this home remains yours."

And then years from now, if the meal gets repeated, someone will say:

"Are we doing Montana Sunrise Pineapple Chicken tonight?"

And everyone will remember the summer evening before Mandy left for Glacier, when Stone's Table wasn't just about grief anymore—it was also about helping someone step forward into life.

That's a meal worth repeating as we have on June 10, 2026

Montana Sunrise Pineapple Chicken

Lets Pray ~

MY Entry for the evening

LETTERS TO THE FUTURE: THE TED JOURNALS (LTTF)

Category: Stone's Table Fellowship Project | Cooking, Family, Grief & Healing
Tags: #StonesTable #MontanaSunriseChicken #Mandy #GlacierNationalPark #CookingMemories #FamilyTable #NewBeginnings #LettersToTheFuture

Tonight ended later than expected. As I sit down at 1:25 AM on June 11th, reflecting on June 10th, I think *Montana Sunrise Chicken* is the winner—whether an official vote ever happened or not.

The reason is simple: the name tells the whole story.

Montana – Mandy's new adventure.
Sunrise – a new beginning, not an ending.
Chicken – the meal that brought everyone together.
Pineapple – the sunshine sitting on top of every piece, adding warmth and a visual reminder that brighter days still exist.

Looking back, the meal itself almost feels secondary to everything surrounding it.

Yesterday brought a pellet jam from swollen pellets during a rainstorm. The smoker spent far too much time stuck in Smoke mode. Dinner ran nearly an hour behind schedule. I found myself fighting weather, equipment, temperatures, and timing throughout the afternoon.

Yet none of those things are what I will remember years from now.

What I will remember is everyone gathering around the table.

I will remember Mandy's sendoff.

I will remember another evening of Stone's Table.

I will remember people eating, laughing, talking, and sharing space together.

Somewhere along the way, this stopped being a recipe.

It became an event.

Because it has a story.

Years from now, when someone asks, *"Do you remember the dinner before Mandy left for Glacier?"* I won't remember internal temperatures, smoker settings, or how late dinner was.

I'll remember the pineapple-topped chicken sitting in the smoker while I fought rain, swollen pellets, and time itself.

I'll remember Mandy preparing to leave for Montana & being scared and wanting to hold on to me and just wanting to stay in Stones room.

I'll remember another gathering around Stone's Table.

And I'll remember that even after losing Stone, life still found a way to gather us together around good food, friendship, and love.

Some recipes become favorites because they're delicious.

Some become favorites because they mark a moment in life.

Montana Sunrise Pineapple Chicken feels like the second kind.

To Myself

Don't overlook what happened here.

You didn't just cook dinner.

You created a memory.

The food gave people a reason to gather, but the gathering was always the real purpose.

Stone's Table is beginning to reveal itself. It isn't about recipes, smokers, bonfires, or menus. Those are simply the tools. The real work is creating a place where people can show up carrying whatever burden they have and leave a little lighter than when they arrived.

Tonight Mandy was surrounded by people who love her before she begins her Montana chapter.

That matters.

The smoker problems won't matter.

The rain won't matter.

Being an hour late won't matter.

What matters is that everyone sat down together.

For a few hours, there was food, conversation, laughter, and peace.

And that is exactly what Stone would have wanted. ❤️

Montana Sunrise ☀️🍍🏔️

A sunrise isn't an ending—it's a beginning. That's exactly what this gathering is about.

Mandy isn't leaving because she's turning her back on home. She's leaving to watch the sun come up on a new chapter of her life. The mountains, the healing, the independence, the adventure—all of it is a sunrise.

THE AUTHOR'S REFLECTION

Two Stones for the Journey

When I look back at our second Stone's Table, I realize this one was different from the first.

There wasn't really a lesson I was trying to teach that night.

We were sending Mandy off.

We moved Stone's Table from our normal Thursday to Wednesday, June 10, because she was leaving the following morning for Montana. She was going to spend the summer working at a lodge in Glacier National Park. It would be her first real time away from home, somewhere she knew almost nobody, and after everything that had happened over the previous month, she was scared.

But when I think about that evening now, I realize the story really started **the day before.**

The Day Before

Mandy and I had a few things we wanted to accomplish together before she left.

One of them was getting her passport paperwork taken care of.

But first, we stopped at **The Village Grind** for coffee.

We shared a blueberry coffee with cream and sugar and a breakfast casserole. There wasn't anything remarkable about what we were doing. We were

simply sitting together having breakfast before going out to take care of a few things.

But I remember what it felt like.

It felt like something I always imagined a father and daughter might do together.

Mandy had scheduled an appointment at the post office for her passport, but there was a problem. She couldn't find her birth certificate. Her mom was looking for it, and Mandy was getting frustrated because she knew she needed it to complete the paperwork.

At one point, while she was talking with her mom on the phone, I interrupted her.

I told her, **"Mandy, listen. Your mom has her reasons, and she's doing her best to find the certificate. Let her help you with this. She wants to do this with you."**

Her mom told her they would take care of it together the following morning.

Since Mandy already had the appointment scheduled and we couldn't figure out how to cancel or reschedule it online, I suggested we go to the post office anyway.

I knew the woman who worked there to be extremely friendly, and I told Mandy that if we simply showed up and explained what happened, she would probably help us figure it out.

There was a line when we arrived.

When we finally reached the counter, the woman I had suspected we would meet was standing there. She was graceful and kind.

She asked what she could help us with.

I looked at Mandy.

“Go ahead. Explain.”

Mandy told her that she had an appointment at 10:00, but she didn’t have all of her paperwork because she couldn’t find her birth certificate. Her mom was looking for it, so she had come in to let them know she wouldn’t be able to keep the appointment.

The woman looked at her and said,

“You are the kindest person. You didn’t have to do that.”

Mandy told her that we had already planned on coming and felt it was right to let them know we would be back the following.

When we walked outside, I looked at her, and It reminded me of something I used to tell Steel and Stone when I dropped them off at school from Grade school through High School:

Be kind.

Be courteous.

And learn something today.

I looked at Mandy and told her,

“You just did all three.”

She was kind.

She was courteous.

And she learned that doing those things can bring a little happiness into somebody else's day.

I asked her "didn't that feel good—just being kind enough to let somebody know rather than simply blowing off the appointment."

And I told her that when she came back the next day, that woman would remember her and probably be that much more supportive and willing to help.

That's exactly what happened.

Mandy went back with her mom the following day, and she told me afterward how kind the woman had been to them.

Once we left the Post Office… From there, we went to Meijer.

I had already put together the grocery list for her sendoff dinner. As we walked through the store, I started giving her an idea of what I was planning for the following evening.

I remember her telling me,

"This is so sweet."

Then there we were, walking through the grocery store together, pushing a cart and filling it with everything we needed.

She was cute about it, grabbing things from the list and asking me if this was what we needed or if that was the right one.

Again, there wasn't anything extraordinary about grocery shopping.

But looking back now, there was something extraordinary about **getting to do ordinary things with her.**

Coffee.

Breakfast.

The post office.

Walking the aisles of Meijer.

Preparing dinner.

For a little while, I wasn't simply helping **Stone's girlfriend** prepare to leave for Montana.

I was spending the day with someone who had become my daughter.

And the next evening, we would gather around the Table to send her away.

We Gathered Around the Table

I had spent most of that Wednesday fighting rain and a smoker that didn't want to cooperate.

Swollen pellets jammed it up. The smoker spent too much time stuck in Smoke mode. Dinner ran almost an hour late. I spent the afternoon fighting weather, equipment, temperatures and time.

Somehow we eventually got **Montana Sunrise Chicken** onto the table.

The boys were there. Mandy had three of her girlfriends there. Her mom was there. Scott, Angela and I were there.

I presented everyone with the names I had come up with for the meal so we could vote on what to call it.

Then I said a few words directly to Mandy.

A sunrise meant **a new day, a new adventure and a chance to heal.** No matter how far away Montana might be, this Table remained hers, and this home remained hers. Those were the words I had prepared for her that night.

Then we opened the conversation.

I asked everyone to go around the table and ask Mandy about what she was scared of and what she was excited about.

It wasn't easy.

There was some awkwardness and reservation at first. Some didn't know what to ask. By the time we got farther around the table, I could tell some of what people wanted to ask had already been asked.

But that was okay.

The conversation was happening.

The rain never let up enough for us to move outside to the fire, so we stayed around the Table.

People ate.

People talked.

People laughed.

And eventually, one by one, everyone started peeling away and heading home.

Then the last boy left.

But the night wasn't over.

Stone's Room

I found myself in Stone's room with Mandy.

She had been spending the night with us relatively every evening.

A couple weeks earlier, somebody had given us this incredibly comfortable beige blanket. I remember Angela handing it to Mandy while the three of us were sitting together in the barrel room.

Angie was under a blanket we already had in the room.

Mandy was under the new one Angela had just given her.

And I was sitting there with them.

We weren't even sharing much.

We were just being with one another.

Mandy eventually took that blanket into Stone's room and had been sleeping with it.

That evening, I found her folding clothes, straightening his room and hanging some of Stone's shirts in his closet.

Under his bed she kept a bag with changes of clothes, nightwear and some of her personal belongings. She was going through it, choosing a few outfits she would take with her to Montana.

Then she looked at me and told me that most of it was staying.

It would always stay there.

I told her that was perfectly fine.

I didn't expect it to ever leave.

Eventually the two of us sat down on Stone's bed, on top of that beige blanket.

While we talked, I remember running my hand through it.

I don't know what material it was or what the weave would even be called. I only know it had to be one of the most comfortable blankets anybody could have.

Part of me wanted Mandy to take it.

Another part of me wanted it to stay.

I didn't suggest either.

If she had asked for it, I would have told her to take it.

But she didn't.

It was almost as though she knew the feelings she had wrapped herself in during those previous two weeks were lying within that blanket.

She wanted it to stay in Stone's room.

As we sat there, I looked around.

His artwork.

Posters.

Concert tickets.

Things from ski trips.

And then there was the wall Mandy had been building for years without probably ever thinking of it that way.

Her letters to Stone.

Everything she wrote him, he had pinned up on that wall almost like a badge of honor.

She caught my eye looking at one.

"Have you ever read that one?"

I hadn't.

She pulled it down.

Then Mandy sat there beside me and read her letter to Stone aloud.

There were tears in her eyes and running down her cheeks.

When she finished, I remember her telling me to put it back **exactly the way Stone had it.**

Stone never put the thumbtack through the paper.

He would catch the edge underneath the head of the tack.

He never wanted to pierce her letters.

So that's exactly how we put it back.

When it finally came time to leave his room, the two of us stood together in the doorway.

We looked back at the bed and took in the entire room.

Then we turned off the light.

Walked out together.

And closed the door.

The Headlights

We knew Maddie was coming to pick Mandy up.

Angela had already gone to bed.

So Mandy and I waited.

Then the headlights came down the cul-de-sac.

We both knew what they meant.

Her time had come.

Before she walked out, Mandy gave me a big hug and a kiss.

I kissed her three times on top of her head.

Like I always do.

Then she walked outside toward Maddie's car.

As soon as she walked out the door, I felt completely lonely.

Sad.

It felt like **a part of Stone was leaving me again.**

Mandy had become a daughter to us.

I've never witnessed a young girl—or known a young woman—profess her love for somebody as much as Mandy had over the years of dating Stone.

It impressed Angela and me.

Sometimes we would even find ourselves laughing at them because it could seem like this overly gushy love story.

But their love went well beyond puppy love.

I had been with my wife nearly thirty years, and I found myself admiring the love this young woman had for my son and the love he had for her. It was admiring to say the very least.

It was as though they had lived a lifetime together.

Yet they were so young.

Those two were soulmates.

No.

They are soulmates.

This part is hard for me to write because the love I have for Mandy comes with so much pain.

I used to tease Stone and call her my **China doll**—her being half Chinese and Polish, with that porcelain skin and her fierce, vibrant character that I always joked must come from her Polish side.

There is so much beauty in her.

Physically.

Intellectually.

Soulfully.

How can somebody be so put together at such a young age and have so much robbed from her?

She has so much to offer this world.

I will pray for the rest of my life that she sees that in herself and allows herself to grow and experience a sense of joy again.

I don't know when that will happen.

I just hope it is sooner rather than later.

Wait. Don't Leave.

After Mandy walked out, I headed back upstairs toward our bedroom.

But something kept bothering me.

There had to be **one more thing I needed to give her.**

Then I thought about Stone's Garden.

At Stone's Celebration of Life, people had written messages on stones from our front yard and placed them in the Garden. We kept additional stones outside in a clay pot so anyone could grab one, write something on it and place it with the others.

I ran back downstairs and outside.

It was pouring rain.

The flagpole light was on, and underneath it the raindrops looked huge.

I remember standing there getting pelted while looking down into that clay pot.

I started picking up stones.

One after another.

I must have picked up a dozen because I wasn't looking for just any two stones.

I was looking for the right two.

Then I found them.

One was round.

Smooth.

Soft.

Simple.

That was my Simple Stone.

The other was light, thin and oval shaped.

I ran back inside carrying both of them.

Then I texted Mandy.

"Please don't leave. I have something that I want to give you."

She responded that she would wait.

I quickly grabbed two markers.

Red and blue.

I put three racing stripes on each stone.

The round one deserved red.

Red was Stone's color.

I could see him wearing my red American Finishers sweatshirt or T-shirt. I could see his red Corvette.

That stone was Stone.

The second one received blue stripes.

Blue is my favorite color.

I ran back outside.

Mandy was waiting in the car.

I leaned into the window and handed her the two stones.

I told her I wanted her to take them with her.

The red one represented Stone.

When she felt like she needed to talk to him, she could hold that stone between her fingers.

Hold Stone himself.

The blue one represented me.

I had intentionally chosen one that was light and thin enough for her to carry throughout her day. She could slip it into her pocket without it bulging out.

That one was there to remind her:

Your home is back here.

This is where I'm at.

I'm always with you too.

And I'll be waiting for you to come home.

I remember her snotty little nose and the tears running down her face.

She thanked me.

She leaned forward and gave me another hug and kiss.

Then I watched her drive away with Maddie.

I was so proud of her.

I was scared for her.

And I so badly wanted to be part of the journey she was about to begin.

But I knew I wasn't going to be.

This was something she had to do on her own.

What I See Now

At the time, I thought we were having a sendoff dinner.

Looking back, I can see Stone's Table beginning to reveal itself to me.

I had spent the afternoon worrying about chicken, rain, a pellet jam, temperatures and getting dinner onto the table.

None of those things became the important part of the story.

I actually wrote that realization in the hours immediately following the gathering:

“You didn’t just cook dinner.

You created a memory.

The food gave people a reason to gather, but the gathering was always the real purpose.”

I didn’t fully understand then how important those words would become.

Stone’s Table wasn’t the piece of furniture.

It wasn’t the food.

It wasn’t the smoker.

It wasn’t whether everything went according to plan.

The Table was becoming the place where we showed up for one another.

That night, we showed up for Mandy.

And after everybody had gone home, I learned something else.

Sometimes loving somebody means wanting desperately to protect them while knowing you have to let them walk into something you cannot walk into for them.

Maybe the best you can do is make sure they know they aren’t walking there empty-handed.

I sent Mandy toward Montana carrying **two stones.**

One said:

Stone is with you.

The other said:

You can always come home.

At the time, I had absolutely no idea how much stones themselves would eventually become part of what we were building.

I wasn't creating a tradition.

I wasn't thinking about a future book.

I wasn't trying to find symbolism.

I was simply a dad standing in the pouring rain, trying to find something small enough for a young woman I loved to carry with her.

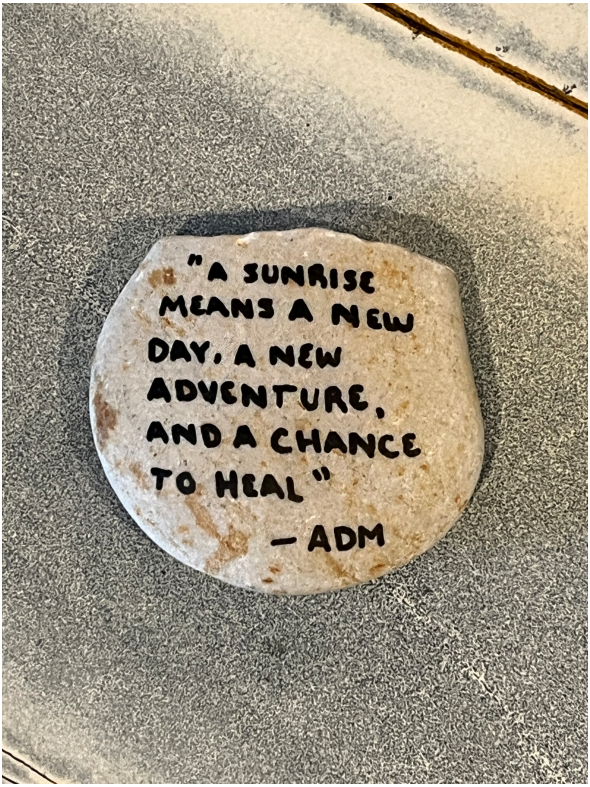
Something that could remind her that Stone was still hers.

That we were still hers.

And that no matter how far she went,

she was not alone.

LESSON 02


"A SUNRISE MEANS A NEW DAY, A NEW ADVENTURE, AND A CHANCE TO HEAL"
— ADM

LESSON 03

The Violin

FRONT OF STONE

Photograph placeholder

THE SONG THAT STOPPED ME

It had been nearly six weeks since we lost Stone.

Six weeks of trying to understand a world that continued moving forward while so much of mine seemed to have stopped.

I had finished an outdoor workout and was sitting on the deck off our bedroom, listening to music.

Music had always been a meaningful part of my life, but lately, I was beginning to experience it differently.

There were songs I had heard countless times that suddenly carried an entirely different meaning. Lyrics I once sang without much thought were finding their way into places within me I hadn't known existed.

And sometimes, it wasn't even the words.

It was the progression of the music. The space between the notes. The emotion carried through an instrument.

That morning, a song caught my attention.

"Violin" by Amos Lee.

I had heard it before, but something about it stopped me that day.

I sat there listening, carrying what I can only describe as a **heavy blanket of grief**.

I was beginning to realize that music was becoming a pathway toward understanding a reality I was still struggling to accept.

Perhaps I was searching for answers.

Perhaps I was simply searching for something that could express what I couldn't find the words to say.

Either way, I found myself listening again.

And thinking.

Where do we look for God when life becomes difficult, confusing, painful, or uncertain?

That question stayed with me.

And as I began sharing the song with people in my life, I discovered that everyone seemed to hear something a little different.

THE CONVERSATIONS BEFORE THE TABLE

I shared my interpretation of the song with my dad, **David E. Antrim**, and my friend **Joe Baldino**.

Joe had experienced his own form of loss with a daughter, and his perspective came from a place I was only beginning to understand.

He reminded me that God doesn't necessarily wait around to pull us through every difficult circumstance.

Sometimes God gives us a nudge, and it's up to us to recognize it and keep moving.

My dad offered something different.

His response was simple:

"You are never abandoned but loved as His child."

Those words landed with me.

I don't want to suggest to the thought that God had abandoned me even though that was the word I chose to use, nor was I sitting around **expecting** Him to rescue me from the reality of losing Stone. However after listening to it again and again while taking in other interpretations I chose to walk away with this

What I heard in the song wasn't necessarily abandonment.

It was longing.

A longing to feel God's presence in the middle of pain.

I remember explaining that distinction to my dad.

Sometimes the heart asks questions that faith already knows the answer to.

And perhaps that was what **I was** experiencing.

Since Stone left us, I had felt broken, confused, angry, grateful, loved, and blessed—sometimes all within the same day.

But through it all, I couldn't honestly say I had been alone.

God had continued showing up through my family, my friends, Mandy, Stone's friends, church, music, and countless little moments that seemed too meaningful to dismiss as coincidence.

The song had given words to the ache.

My dad's response reminded me of the truth.

I also shared the song with **Ryan Hallett**, one of Angela's colleagues at Payroc, who has since become a dear friend.

His response led him to tell me about a period in his life when he developed a deeper relationship with God, and how that experience continued to influence him years later.

Ryan also offered words of encouragement about what I was doing with the boys.

Here were three different men, each speaking from his own experiences, offering something for me to consider.

And I was listening.

I didn't know it at the time, but those conversations were helping prepare me for what would happen next.

THE TABLE WITHOUT THE TABLE

Thursday, June 18, was supposed to be our third gathering.

We had plans to attend the Payroc Veterans Tribute, so we wouldn't be home that evening. It was one of the first events Angela, Steel, and I had chosen to attend together since losing Stone.

I still think about that—Angela, Steel, and me… **together.**

This was what it was going to look like for now on — Angela brought home a picture to hang not long ago, it became clear to me that I wasn't the only one that came to this realization, while maybe not necessarily fully excepting or understanding this new emotion/ feeling… we were at least willing to recognize it as it was



— to bring you back! I didn't want to let the week pass without connecting with the boys.

We had only gathered twice.

Stone's Table was still very much in its infancy, and I wanted to establish some consistency.

I also didn't believe fellowship had to depend entirely on everyone being physically present.

So that morning, at **9:14 AM**, I sent a message to our group.

I told the boys we wouldn't be gathering in person, but I wanted to leave them with a little homework assignment.

Listen to "Violin" by Amos Lee.

I explained that the song had struck me differently than it ever had before and that I'd spent time discussing it with a few people.

I shared two thoughts I'd received:

"God nudges you through, He doesn't leave you waiting."

And:

"You are never abandoned but loved as His child."

But I deliberately chose not to tell them what to think.

Instead, I asked them to consider the song for themselves.

What did it mean to them?

What line stood out?

What emotions did it bring up?

Did they agree with the message or disagree?

And perhaps most importantly:

Where do you see God when life gets hard?

I wasn't looking for a particular answer.

I wanted to hear theirs.

Not Google's interpretation. Not the songwriter's intended meaning. Not even mine.

Theirs.

Because I was beginning to believe that understanding someone requires more than telling them what you know.

Sometimes it requires asking what they think.

And then being willing to listen.

THE COURAGE TO GO FIRST

At **10:55 AM**, Kurtis responded.

I remember reading his message and feeling humbled.

There was a warmth in my heart as I worked through his words.

Not simply because he had taken the time to listen to the song, but because of how quickly he had been willing to put his thoughts and feelings out there for everyone to read.

That takes courage.

Kurtis described life as a roller coaster and talked about how our emotions can influence the paths we choose.

He believed God nudges us through difficult times.

Not pushing.

Not shoving.

Not pulling.

Just offering a little nudge.

And when we recognize it, perhaps we find the ambition or encouragement to keep moving forward.

He also suggested that the violin might represent something different for everyone.

Music.

A car.

A motorcycle.

A book.

A message.

Something meaningful enough to help us recognize God's presence.

Toward the end of his response, Kurtis acknowledged that he might simply be rambling.

But he added that he thought the song had Stone in it.

That touched me.

I replied with a thought of my own:

“Or maybe he’s WAITING for US to pull through after he gives us a nudge.”

And I made sure to acknowledge something else.

It’s never easy going first.

I wanted Kurtis to know I appreciated what he’d done.

Because what I was witnessing wasn’t merely participation in an assignment.

It was one of the first examples of what I had hoped this fellowship would become.

A young man willing to be vulnerable in front of his friends.

WHAT FELLOWSHIP WAS SUPPOSED TO MEAN

Kurtis’s response brought me back to our first gathering on June 4.

That evening, after reading the founding message I’d written for the boys, I remember asking them a question.

“Do you boys know what fellowship means?”

A few offered their thoughts.

Others hesitated, perhaps unsure whether they had the right answer.

Eventually, someone admitted they weren’t certain and asked me to explain.

I don’t have my exact words from that evening recorded, but I remember the general message I wanted them to understand.

Fellowship doesn't require a large congregation or an organized institution.

Sometimes it begins with just a handful of people willing to gather together.

But gathering alone isn't what makes it fellowship.

It's the willingness to open yourself up. To share what you're thinking, even when you're uncertain. To listen when someone else has something to say. And to support one another as we grow.

I also made something explicitly clear to the boys that first evening.

These gatherings weren't intended to be their typical hangouts.

There should absolutely be fun, laughter, and celebration.

I wanted those things to be part of our time together.

But Stone's Table wasn't intended to be another social event or party.

I told them they had plenty of other nights for that, and I expected them to enjoy those nights.

But this night was different.

This was our opportunity to come together and be real with one another.

To ask the hard questions. To support one another through uncertainty. And most importantly, to show up for one another.

That was what I had hoped to establish.

And now, only three gatherings into this journey, I was beginning to see it happen.

WE ALL HAVE OUR OWN VIOLINS

At **12:27 PM**, Andrew responded.

And I remember feeling somewhat surprised.

I had always recognized a certain calmness in Andrew's character.

He seemed to have a way of listening, taking things in, and processing what he heard before responding.

But this was one of the first times I had seen him express those thoughts in writing.

And there was something **grounded and raw** about his response.

Andrew built upon what Kurtis had shared.

He agreed that the violin could represent something different for each of us.

Something through which we might express ourselves or discover our faith.

But then he offered a thought that caught my attention.

He wrote that we all have our own violins.

"But most importantly we all now share one together, Stones table."

I remember thinking about that.

Andrew went on to explain that we didn't necessarily need to gather at an eight o'clock Sunday church service to find God or speak to Him.

We could find Him at Stone's Table, too.

He even recalled something I'd shared at our first gathering.

None of us were perfect Christians.

We all had our faults.

We all made mistakes.

But those imperfections didn't prevent us from gathering together, sharing our faith, and seeking God's guidance.

I knew Andrew understood what I'd been trying to communicate.

And what surprised me wasn't simply that he understood.

It was how thoughtfully he had expressed it.

He hadn't repeated my words.

He had taken the idea of fellowship, considered what it meant to him, and made it his own.

I replied that I hoped Stone's Table would become a place where we could grow naturally, talk about real concerns in our lives, and still enjoy a little nonsense to keep things light.

I wanted that kind of fellowship with each of them.

And in my fatherly opinion, I believed it was one of the best ways we could honor Stone.

WHEN THE TEACHER BECOMES THE STUDENT

I had established Stone's Table believing I had something to offer these young men.

Perhaps a little guidance from my own experiences.

Some lessons I'd learned along the way.

And hopefully an opportunity to help them develop their own relationship with God.

What I hadn't necessarily considered was how much I might learn from them.

Kurtis had demonstrated the courage to share his feelings openly.

Andrew had demonstrated an understanding of why that openness mattered.

And both had given me something worth thinking about.

I was beginning to discover that fellowship wasn't a one-way conversation.

It wasn't about one man standing in front of a group, delivering wisdom while everyone else listened.

It was about being willing to listen ourselves.

To recognize that wisdom can come from someone younger.

Someone with less experience.

Someone who sees the same circumstances through an entirely different set of eyes.

And sometimes, that different perspective is precisely what we need.

I was learning that the role I had taken on with these boys didn't require me to have all the answers.

It required me to remain willing to learn alongside them.

That realization was becoming just as meaningful to me as anything I hoped to teach.

THE VOICES THEY HADN'T HEARD

There was something else the boys didn't know that Thursday.

Although I'd shared two brief statements in my original message, I hadn't shared the conversations behind them.

They didn't know what Joe and my dad had written to me.

They didn't know how much those words had meant.

And they didn't know that while I was encouraging them to share their thoughts openly, I had been doing much the same thing with other men in my life.

Looking back, I recognize something meaningful about that.

I had been searching for understanding through a song.

I had invited the boys to explore its meaning alongside me.

And when I reflected on their responses, together with what Joe and my dad had shared, I found reassurance.

Not because anyone had explained away my grief.

Not because someone had provided an answer that suddenly made losing Stone easier to understand.

But because each person had offered something from his own experience.

And I had been willing to receive it.

Fellowship isn't limited to the people sitting at the Table. Sometimes the wisdom we bring to it comes from those who have been walking beside us all along.

I want to acknowledge both of these men for that.

My dad reminded me of God's enduring love and presence.

Joe reminded me that recognizing God's guidance also requires a willingness to respond.

Their words were different.

Their experiences were different.

But both gave me something meaningful to carry forward.

And now, through this book, the boys have an opportunity to hear those words for themselves.

THE PROMISE TO SHOW UP

As Thursday came to an end, I found myself wanting to reach out to the boys one more time.

Throughout the day, several had sent private messages offering support, encouragement, and kind words.

I wanted them to know how much that meant to me.

But there was something else I wanted them to understand.

Each of those young men carried a piece of Stone within them.

Through their friendships, memories, experiences, and the lives they'd shared with my boy, there was a connection between us that wasn't going away.

I told them that for as long as I walked on this side of the grass, I wanted to be someone they could lean on.

I knew they would grow older.

Their lives would change.

There would be struggles they might not know how to talk about.

And eventually, there might be miles between us.

But I wanted them to remember that I would do my best to show up.

Sometimes showing up is all we need to do.

Not to fix someone's problems.

Not to provide every answer.

But simply to be present.

I was beginning to understand that the presence of another person can offer a kind of comfort that words alone sometimes cannot.

And I believed God could be present in those moments, too.

It was a simple message.

But it was one I meant.

THE REFLECTION — WHAT I RECEIVED

When I think back to June 18, I don't remember it as the Thursday we missed Stone's Table.

I remember it as the Thursday we discovered that **Stone's Table could exist even when we weren't sitting around it.**

A song had started a conversation.

A young man had found the courage to go first.

Another had recognized that the fellowship we were building belonged to all of us.

And somewhere along the way, I had received something I hadn't expected.

Reassurance.

From my dad.

From Joe.

From the boys.

From the willingness of people to share their experiences and listen to one another.

I began this journey believing I had something to teach.

And only three gatherings into it, I was already learning.

Perhaps that was one of the first lessons Stone's Table had to offer me.

Wisdom isn't always something we give.

Sometimes it's something we receive when we're willing to listen.

And on that Thursday, I received more than I had expected.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

Stones Table Virtual meeting June 18th, 2026

This feels very much in the spirit of Stone's Table- Not a sermon, not a lesson—just something to think about and discuss.

As mentioned

I won't be able to make it tonight so we WILL meet next week, but I wanted to leave you boys with a little homework assignment virtually around Stone's Table.

Take a few minutes today or tonight and listen to the song *Violin* **by Amos Lee.**

I've spent the last day chewing on it myself and talking about it with a few people. The song hit me differently than it ever has before, and I found myself asking what it was really trying to say.

Some thoughts I received back were:

"God nudges you through, He doesn't leave you waiting."

"You are never abandoned but loved as His child."

Both of those landed with me.

As I've reflected on the song, I don't think it's really about a violin at all. I think it's

about where people look for God when life becomes difficult, confusing, painful, or uncertain.

So here's the question I'd like each of you to think about:

What do you think the song means?

Not what Google says.
Not what I think.
Not what the songwriter intended.

What does it mean to you right now in your life?

What line stood out?

What emotions did it bring up?

Do you agree with the message or disagree with it?

Where do you see God when life gets hard?

No right answers. No wrong answers.

Just think about it and if you'd like, share your thoughts back with the group.

Miss you boys tonight.

— Ted

I think Stone would have liked this one. Not because it has an answer, but because it invites conversation. Just remember the best

nights around Stone's Table aren't usually going to be about arriving at the same conclusion—they're about hearing how differently everyone sees the same thing.

Kurtis replies:

I truly think that song perfectly represents the meaning of life on a rollercoaster. God knows who each and everyone of use are and he will put things or people in our past that will either make or break us . And we tend to let our emotions decide what past we choose or how we react or even how we live . I do truly believe that God nudges us through the hard and difficult times doesn't push doesn't shove doesn't pull just a little nudge and if we feel that nudge, we find the ambition or we find what influences the soul to keep moving forward . I think " God hanging out in that old violin" could mean anything your heart entails that violin could be something to do with music or something to do with acoustics or maybe it's a car or a bike or a book or a message. In the song, he states while I've been waiting for you to pull me through. God might just be hanging out in an old violin. And we are waiting for him to pull us through whether that means one thing or another it could mean, pulling us through the harsh and difficult times or maybe he's waiting for us to pull through after he gave us a nudge. I don't know if I'm just blabbing, but I definitely think that song has stone in it

*Path autocorrected to past a couple times but you'll get the point

I (Ted) replied:

"Or maybe he's WAITING for US to pull through after he gives us a nudge"😉

It's never easy going 1st Kurtis...well said

Andrew replied with :

I agree with Kurt, I like that he brought up the idea that "God hangin out in that old violin" could represent a plethora of things. I think that this artist enjoys playing or listening to the violin & so their way of expressing or finding faith is within their violin. For most of us, we all have our own "Violins", but most importantly we all now share one together, Stones table.

This meaning, we don't have to all show up together at 8am every Sunday to find god or to speak to our father, but we can find him at Stones table. At our first meeting, correct me if i'm wrong but Ted hit on the idea that none of us are perfect christians. we all sin, some of us drink, some of us smoke, some of us cuss a little more than others, but the coolest part about being a christian is we can all still come together and bear faith for our heavenly father & he will still be there to listen & guide us through life.

The lyric "while i've been waiting for you to pull me through" was a good one, it shows us that when we

are in our dark places, we can always rely on god to pull us through those evil thoughts.

I replied:

Love it Andrew... it definitely does not take a 8am Sunday service to bring us together. I'd like to think that's what we will consider "Stones Table" as for us , to allow for us to grow naturally and actually talk about real concerns in our lives...with a little bit of nonsense to keep it light. I want to do that with each of you, that type of Fellowship is really special and in my fatherly opinion the best way to Honnor Stone

— — —

When I shared with my friend Ryan. One of Angela's colleagues from Payroc he delivered this:

It's the only answer. Really is.

I need to tell you the part of my life one day when we are together.

The short:

-wasn't a great student

-Although didn't get into much trouble

-Grew up variable collar

-If I went to college, I had to pay my own way

-decided to do a Christian internship in -Texas from the August after I graduated until the following August (2000-2001)

-grew up in Faith based home. Parents loved me and I always knew that

-well at this internship, I truly found a relationship with God

-he became a best friend

-I left there with a focus on a mission to follow him

-was is accepted to Illinois State University because of a letter I wrote about my mission in my focus to combat my poor grades

-got straight A's for three straight years

Through all that God taught me to believe in trusting him. After college, I challenge myself to do sales. Door by door.

God kept His promise while I did my best to keep mine. I fall short every day, just like I do now.

The blessing is that God taught me the Mendoza line. Even to today, I reflect back on that year in the relationship I had with him. He was my girlfriend, my father, my friend. He filled all the holes.

I guess back to my original point. HE is the only way. And if I wasn't so damn selfish I'd feel more like I felt the 2000-2001

These boys need a man like you in their lives. Again- you are running towards that vs away. I believe that

is the most important. And from the sideline is teaching younger parents, like me a road that I need to drive on myself.

— – –

My text I sent my Dad:

Violin

My take on this song "Violin" by Amos Lee, from Mission Bell. It's a prayer from a man who feels cornered by life – noise, pressure, ambition, sleeplessness, and people hurting each other – and he's asking God why comfort feels hidden inside music instead of plainly rescuing him.

The line about God "hanging out in that old violin" feels like: I can sense You somewhere beautiful, but I can't quite reach You right now. The violin becomes grief's instrument – fragile, aching, human. It does not fix the pain; it gives the pain a voice.

What hits hardest is that he is not asking for success or answers. He is asking to be pulled through. That's different. That's survival language.

I'd hear it like this:

I'm walking through a world that still moves – bars, trucks, tradesmen, memories, songs – but my inside world is cracked wide open. And sometimes God does not show up as an explanation. Sometimes He shows up as a sound, a memory, a hug from

construction tradesmen, or a song that says what you couldn't.

This song is not hopeless. It's exhausted faith. It's a man still talking to God even while feeling abandoned.

Dad response:

You are never abandoned but loved as His child

Are you up for lunch today?

I (Ted) replied:

Dad, I think you and I are actually closer in our thinking than it may have sounded.

When I shared the song, I wasn't saying that I believe God has abandoned me or that I'm sitting around waiting for Him to rescue me. What spoke to me was the feeling the song captures when grief makes everything look and sound different. Sometimes the heart asks questions that faith already knows the answer to.

What I heard in the song was not abandonment, but longing. A longing to feel God's presence in the middle of pain.

Your words, "You are never abandoned but loved as His child," are really the answer to the struggle the song is describing. The song is the cry. Your words are the reassurance.

Since Stone left us, there have been moments when I've felt broken, confused, angry, grateful, loved, and

blessed–sometimes all in the same day. Through all of it, I can honestly say I have never been alone. God has shown up through family, friends, Mandy, Stone's friends, church, music, and countless small moments that seem too meaningful to be coincidence.

I think what moved me about the song was that it gave words to the ache. What moved me about your response was that it reminded me of the truth.

Thank you, Dad. I hear you, and I needed that reminder.

Dad's response:

Jesus is the supreme comforter. He shed his own blood for you. Feel it. There is no other friend like him.

Side Note: My Dad chose to drive out that day to sit with me and explore my thoughts, it was helpful we ended up sharing a #13 at Jersey Mikes as well, a sandwich Stone & I would often split on a Thursday afternoon after him getting home from school.

I sent to Joe Baldino the same text with my take from the song, his response was this:

That is that's such a beautiful song and it's great to listen to that once in a while but don't get in the mindset you're waiting for God to pull you through. God nudges you to get through. He ain't waiting. It's on you, and everything that is assigned to you is related toward you for healing

I had a lot of arguments with God when I lost Carmela. And yes, everything in my life had a different flavor the moment I realized she was gone. God is also the force that keeps you as in your soul connected to everything else around you.

LESSON 03

JOE BALDINO

Perspective Through Loss

"God nudges you to get through. He ain't waiting. It's on you, and everything that is assigned to you is related toward you for healing"

BACK OF STONE

Photograph placeholder

DAVID E. ANTRIM

Reassurance Through Faith

"You are never abandoned but loved as His child"

"Jesus is the supreme comforter. He shed his own blood for you. Feel it. There is no other friend like him."

LESSON 04

One Word — Around the Fire

FRONT OF STONE

Photograph placeholder

THE FOURTH GATHERING

Thursday, June 25, 2026.

This was my first week returning to work with Okaw since losing Stone.

I wasn't sure how I was going to manage it. Monday was slow, Tuesday became demanding, and Wednesday turned into one of the most emotionally difficult days I had experienced since May 9.

By Thursday morning, I had a project deadline to meet, and I wasn't certain I had enough left in me to get there.

I started working at four in the morning.

At approximately seven that evening, just as the boys began arriving for Stone's Table, I finished the project, sent the email, and submitted my invoice.

I had made it through my first week back.

But I hadn't found the time to prepare a formal lesson for the boys.

I remember telling them that. I had given some thought to what we could do together, and I wanted to keep it simple.

We ordered four large pizzas from Pizza Cucina, gathered around the table, ate, laughed, and caught up with one another.

There was something familiar about having pizza with the boys. Pizza Cucina had always been one of Steel and Stone's favorites growing up.

After dinner, we moved outside to the bonfire.

I had one question for everyone.

What was the one feeling that revisited you most throughout this past week?

I asked each person to choose a word and then tell us why.

One by one, everyone shared.

There wasn't a right answer. There wasn't a wrong answer. Nobody needed to impress anyone or pretend their week had been better than it was.

And what impressed me most was how naturally the conversation unfolded.

The boys listened to one another. They offered thoughts, suggestions, encouragement, and understanding.

Some of the answers brought laughter. Others brought more serious conversation.

I don't believe many of these young men had experienced something quite like this before.

And there wasn't any awkwardness about it.

They were willing to speak, and everyone else was willing to listen.

AROUND THE FIRE

One word to describe the feeling that revisited you most this week.

Word	Who shared it
Relief (3)	Austin, Jake, Ted
Boring (2)	JJ, Angel
Fun	Cam
Drunk	Tommy
Paranoid	Jonny
Aggravated	Andrew
F#@K	Daniel
Frenzy	Kurtis
Support	Steel
Confusion	Joe
Anger (2)	Ted, Angela
Excitement / Satisfied	Migy
Anxious	Jayden, Carlie Brown

Looking back at those words, I can see how differently each of us had experienced the same week.

Some were relieved. Some were angry. Some were confused. Others had found excitement or enjoyment.

But for a few hours, we were all sitting around the same fire.

And we gave each other the opportunity to be heard.

That was our lesson.

A LITTLE LONGER

As the evening came to an end and everyone began heading home, Jonny asked me something I will never forget.

He wanted to know if he could stay outside a little longer.

He told me I could go inside if I wanted. He just wasn't ready to leave.

So I stayed.

Jonny was probably Stone's first and oldest friend. They had known each other since first grade.

His older brother Tommy was Steel's age, and those four boys had grown up together. From grade school through high school, their lives had been closely intertwined.

Jonny had probably spent more time with Stone throughout his life than almost anyone outside our family.

That night, sitting beside the fire, he shared a story with me that I had never heard before.

THE WILLOW TREE

Jonny told me about the nights he and Stone would sneak out of our house and make their way over to the golf course.

Those two had been nearly inseparable since first grade.

Over the years, their circle of friends included Austin, Angel, JJ, Brady, Tommy, and Steel. I imagine different combinations of those boys found their way out there at one time or another, although I couldn't say for certain who was there on any particular night.

What I do know is that Jonny and Stone shared those nights together, and they returned to that place often.

Sometimes it was a weekend. Sometimes it was a summer weeknight.

They would follow the creek toward the Route 34 bridge, cross underneath it, and make their way over a wooden bridge used by the golf carts.

Not far from there stood an enormous willow tree.

Its trunk must have been five feet around, with long branches hanging down toward the ground.

That was their spot.

I can picture those boys going about their day, working, hanging out, finding ways to pass the time, knowing that later that evening they might end up together beneath that tree.

The anticipation of getting away for a few hours.

Waiting until the house was quiet and the rest of the world had gone to sleep.

Then making their way down the creek and across the golf course.

Once they reached the willow, there was nowhere else they needed to be.

They would lie beneath its branches, playing music from their phones, looking up at the stars and moon, laughing, and talking about whatever was on their minds.

And from what Jonny told me, they weren't always out there just admiring the stars.

I couldn't help but smile.

I remembered being young myself.

That entire golf course had become their playground, and that willow tree was the place they kept returning to.

Jonny told me that on many occasions they stayed there until the sun began coming up.

The sky would slowly brighten, and the birds would begin chirping.

They knew it was time to head home.

But sometimes, he said, he just wanted to keep lying there.

Apparently, there were even a couple of occasions when the groundskeeper came along the path and chased them off, telling them to get home.

I laughed when he told me that.

I could picture the whole thing almost like a scene from *Stand by Me*.

A group of young men, sneaking around a golf course in the middle of the night, finding their own adventures, sharing conversations and laughter, and occasionally getting themselves into a little trouble.

Jonny told me those were some of the most peaceful evenings they had ever spent together.

And that he would always hold those memories among his favorites.

Hearing that made me incredibly happy as Stone's father.

Not because I necessarily approved of everything they were doing out there.

But because I knew they had experienced those nights together.

They had a place of their own.

A place where they could escape the noise of everyday life and enjoy being young.

I think most adults can remember something similar from their own lives.

A place. A group of friends. A summer evening when time didn't seem to matter.

Remembering those experiences can bring tremendous happiness.

And sometimes sadness, because we miss them.

But something about Jonny's story struck me differently.

For these boys, it wasn't a lifetime ago.

They had only recently finished high school.

They were beginning their working lives and learning what it meant to become young men.

Those nights beneath the willow tree weren't distant memories from decades earlier.

They were practically yesterday.

And summer hadn't even really begun when we lost Stone on May 9.

I've always loved that feeling when summer begins to announce itself.

Even as an adult, I recognize it.

There's a different smell in the air. The days grow longer. The evenings seem to offer more time. There's a sense of enjoyment and anticipation, almost as though life might slow down for a while.

For those boys, summer had meant nights like the ones beneath that willow tree.

And I was grateful to learn that Stone had experienced so many of them.

THE BOYS AND ME

I've always enjoyed being around my boys and their friends.

Their friendship, their camaraderie, the laughter, the stories, even listening to them vent about whatever

was going on in their lives. I've always found myself enjoying their company.

I suppose a lot of that comes from remembering my own youth.

Growing up, there were five of us who were as thick as thieves. We did everything together, got into our share of trouble, and created memories that we're still laughing about today. All these years later, the five of us are still close, still sharing stories in our group chat.

So when Jonny told me about those nights beneath the willow tree, I understood something about what made them so special.

I had experienced that kind of friendship myself.

And if I'm being completely truthful, there was a part of me that wished I could have been one of those boys.

Not standing there as their father, keeping an eye on them or reminding them to make good decisions.

But actually being one of them.

Walking across that golf course on a warm summer night, laughing about something stupid, lying beneath that enormous willow tree, looking up at the stars without a care in the world.

I've always considered my sons my friends. **My best friends.**

Some of the greatest enjoyment I've had in life has come from simply spending time with them. They make me laugh. They keep me young. And they've

probably contributed to a few gray hairs and most of my bald head along the way.

But I wouldn't trade that time with them for anything.

I've often thought how much fun it would have been to experience life alongside them at their age. To have been part of their circle, sharing the same adventures, the same excitement, and the same freedom that comes with being young.

Of course, I wouldn't trade being their dad for anything either.

For just one of those summer nights, I would have loved to experience that same freedom alongside them—not as their father looking back on his youth, but as a young man sharing in theirs.

Hearing Jonny describe those evenings reminded me of something I've always loved about raising my boys.

I didn't just enjoy watching them grow up. I genuinely enjoyed the people they were becoming and the friendships they were building.

And I couldn't help but smile.

THE QUIET BETWEEN US

Jonny and I remained outside for about another hour that evening.

We didn't spend the entire time talking.

In fact, much of it was spent sitting quietly beside one another.

I could tell he was struggling.

He was having a difficult time understanding his feelings, much less finding the words to explain them.

I understood that.

I was struggling with many of those same things myself.

And I think the silence gave both of us something we needed.

Jonny didn't have to explain his grief to me.

I didn't have to explain mine to him.

We just sat there.

Two people missing the same young man, remembering him in different ways, but loving him just the same.

I was grateful Jonny asked to stay.

Because as much comfort as I hope my presence brought him, having him sitting there beside me was equally comforting.

We both felt Stone with us that night.

And neither of us was in any hurry to leave.

WHAT I CARRIED AWAY

I began that Thursday exhausted from a week I wasn't certain I could finish.

I hadn't prepared a formal lesson.

All I had was some pizza, a question, and a place for everyone to gather.

But the boys showed me something that evening.

Fellowship doesn't always need a prepared message.

Sometimes it begins with a simple question and the willingness to listen.

Sometimes it continues long after everyone else has gone home.

And sometimes the most meaningful moments happen when nobody feels the need to say anything at all.

I went into that evening thinking I hadn't prepared enough.

Looking back, I think we had everything we needed.

A table. A fire. Each other.

And a little more time together.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

Stone's Table – The Fellowship Project
June 25, 2026
"One Word"
Dinner
Pizza from Pizza Cucina one of Stone and Steels favorites

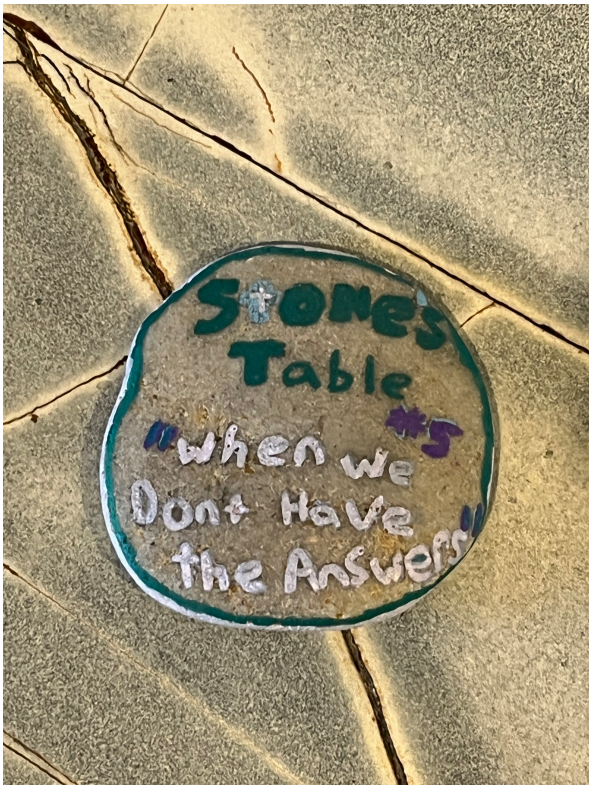
LESSON 04

BACK OF STONE

Photograph placeholder

LESSON 05

When We Don’t Have the Answers



THE MAN I CALLED

Some friendships are built over time. Others begin in a moment and somehow manage to last a lifetime.

My friendship with **Scott Musso** began in the second grade, with a baseball and a schoolyard.

Scott had recently moved from the city to the suburbs. His father was Johnny Musso, a former running back for the Chicago Bears, known during his football career as the Italian Stallion.

To me, Johnny was something else entirely.

He was my living Rocky Balboa.

I grew up across a bike path from the school where Johnny happened to be playing softball one evening. I was doing what young boys did back then, wandering over to the schoolyard looking for something to do. That's where I met Scott.

We started throwing a baseball around, and before long, we'd made friends. I remember Scott asking his mother if I could sleep over that night.

Now, understand something. I'd never spent the night at another kid's house before. But here I was, having just met this boy, and I was ready to go.

His mother, **Tanner Musso**, walked over to our house with us. Tanner was a wonderful Southern woman. Always cooking, always welcoming people into her home, and always willing to have a conversation.

She and my mother talked, exchanged phone numbers, and made arrangements. When the softball game ended and the Musso's returned home, my mother packed my bag, loaded me into the station wagon, and drove me over.

I remember jumping out, ready to play. My mother asked if I was certain I wanted to stay. Of course I was.

Until bedtime.

As the house grew quiet and everyone started falling asleep, I began feeling homesick. I woke Scott and told him I was scared and wanted to go home. He directed me to his brothers, who eventually brought me upstairs to Johnny and Tanner.

There I stood, a little boy who had been so excited about his first sleepover, now embarrassed and struggling to explain why I wanted to leave.

Johnny asked me what was wrong. I couldn't find the words. He looked at me and gently asked if I was homesick. I nodded.

He offered to call my mother. After speaking with her, he told me that if I wanted to go home, he'd take me.

But somehow, through his kindness and reassurance, I found myself climbing into bed between Johnny and Tanner. And I fell asleep. I woke up the following morning having made it through my first sleepover.

That memory still puts a smile on my face. And Johnny's, too.

It wasn't the last time I found myself homesick at the Musso house. There were several more sleepovers when I ended up upstairs, looking for reassurance from the same man. Eventually, I believe they even made a little bed for me in their walk-in closet.

Looking back, I recognize something about Johnny that I couldn't have explained as a little boy. Here was this physically imposing man, a professional football player whom I admired tremendously.

But the qualities I came to cherish most weren't his athletic accomplishments. They were his **faith, honor, and compassion.**

He knew how to make a frightened little boy feel safe. And Tanner helped make their home a place where people felt welcome.

I didn't realize it then, but I was witnessing something I would come to value for the rest of my life.

The strength of a man isn't measured only by what he can overcome. Sometimes it's measured by how gently he treats someone who is struggling.

Scott and I became best friends. We grew up together, carrying that friendship through adolescence and into high school.

Eventually, our interests took us in different directions. Scott became serious about football. I found my place on the soccer field. There wasn't an argument or a falling-out. Life simply began pulling us along different paths.

Years later, we found ourselves getting married around the same time. And wouldn't you know it?

We ended up on the same airplane leaving for our honeymoons.

Our friendship continued, although we weren't seeing one another regularly. Then, years later, our boys started playing rugby. Neither Scott nor I had grown up playing the sport.

Yet there we were, standing across a rugby pitch from one another, watching our children run up and down the field. Two boys who had once thrown a baseball together were now fathers watching their own boys compete.

We started reconnecting. Eventually, we discovered another common interest.

Cigars.

We began meeting at a cigar lounge, sitting together, talking about life, our families, and the things we believed. And what I found was that although decades had passed, we still shared many of the same values our parents had instilled in us.

We believed in living with integrity. We believed in standing behind our convictions. And we believed in God.

It was a friendship I had missed for nearly forty years. And I was grateful to have it back.

THE FRIEND WHO SHOWED UP

On the evening before Stone's Celebration of Life, I called Scott. I was preparing to do something no father should ever have to prepare for. I was going to stand before our family and friends and speak about my son.

I didn't know how I was going to get through it. Scott offered me some advice that I carried into that evening. Those words belong to another part of this story, but I remember how grateful I was to have someone I trusted enough to call.

After Stone's death, Scott continued making himself available. He became a regular presence in my life. When I began gathering Stone's friends around our fire, I asked Scott whether he'd be interested in joining us. He accepted.

And on Thursday morning, July 2, 2026, I found myself reaching out to him again. This time, I wasn't looking for advice about speaking at my son's Celebration of Life.

I was struggling with something different.

I was struggling with my faith.

Not whether I believed in God. Not whether I believed Stone was in Heaven. I was struggling to understand how to worship a God I loved while carrying grief that I couldn't begin to explain.

Every morning since Stone died, I had been reading my Bible, spending time in devotionals, praying, and listening to worship music. But something felt different.

The songs I once sang with joy had become difficult to embrace. I knew God was good. I believed He could heal me. But I couldn't understand how to turn my grief into praise.

So I texted Scott. And what did he do? He didn't try to explain God's plan. He didn't tell me how I should feel. He offered to talk. He offered to text. He even offered to meet me for brunch.

He made himself available.

It struck me that morning how valuable a friend like that could be. And it reminded me of something I'd experienced many years earlier, when a frightened little boy had been welcomed into the arms of Scott's father.

Sometimes people don't need an explanation.

Sometimes they simply need someone willing to be there.

That became the heart of what I wanted to share with the boys that evening.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

Stone's Table – The Fellowship Project
July 2, 2026
Table #5
When We Don't Have the Answers

Dinner

"Before we eat tonight, I'd like to read something from my devotional that I read this morning. It stayed with me all day."

'Let Me show you My way for you this day. I guide you continually, so you can relax and enjoy My Presence in the present... Pray about everything; then leave outcomes up to Me... Take a deep breath and dive into the depths of absolute trust in Me... Underneath are the everlasting arms.'

Deuteronomy 33:27

"The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."

"I don't know why, but those last words have been running through my mind all day..."

😀 **Pray.**

Eat dinner.

Around the Fire

"Last week we did something different.

I asked each of you to describe your week in one word."

(Read the list.)

Relief

Boring

Fun

Drunk

Paranoid

Aggravated

F#@k

Frenzy

Support

Confusion

Anger

Excitement

Satisfied

Anxious

"Think about that list.

Not one person walked into this circle carrying the same thing.

Yet every one of you shared.

Nobody laughed.

Nobody judged.

Nobody tried to fix someone else's problems.

You simply listened.

That...is fellowship."

My Struggle This Morning

"I've got to be honest with you guys...

This morning I woke up wrestling with something.

Every morning since Stone passed, I've been spending time reading my Bible, reading my devotional, praying, and listening to worship music.

This morning I realized something...

I'm struggling."

"I texted my friend Scott this morning because I trust him."

I sent him this:

'I'm struggling to understand how to really appreciate these worship lyrics like I used to. I know God is good. I'm choosing every morning to pray and spend time with Him. I'm not mad at Him. I know Stone is in Heaven. But I don't know how to turn my grief into praise. I believe God can heal me, but I'm confused.'

"I don't know if any of you have ever felt that way.

Maybe you've prayed and didn't feel anything.

Maybe you've questioned God.

Maybe you've wondered why something happened.

Maybe you've been afraid to admit it because you thought Christians were supposed to have all the answers."

"I don't think that's true anymore."

A Friend Doesn't Always Have the Answer

Scott wrote back almost immediately.

'Want to talk tonight? Want to text? I can even meet you for brunch.'

"Notice what he didn't do.
He didn't try to fix me.
He didn't preach.
He didn't tell me what I should feel.
He simply made himself available."
"That hit me today."

Friendship

"It made me realize...
Having a friend like that is one of God's greatest gifts.
Someone willing to listen.
Someone willing to try to understand.
Someone who simply says...
'I'm here.'"
"But here's the catch...
If we want friends like that...
we have to become friends like that."
"Be willing to be real.
Be honest.
Find one or two people.
Go fishing.
Go for breakfast.
Sit around a fire.
Take a drive.
Turn the phones off.

Find somewhere quiet enough that you can actually think together."

"You don't always need advice.

Sometimes the greatest gift you can give someone...

is simply your presence."

Introducing Scott

"After I shared all of that with him, Scott texted me something else."

'I'd be happy to offer up my story and perspective... It would basically be responding to you out loud.'

"So tonight...

I asked him if he'd be willing to share.

The interesting part is...

I haven't heard what he's going to say either.

Tonight...

I'm sitting with you guys.

I'm listening too."

"Scott...would you mind sharing what you wanted to tell me?"

After Scott Finishes

"Thank you."

"I'd like to hear from you guys before I say anything else."

Discussion Questions

What stood out to you from what Scott shared?

Have you ever had someone simply be there for you?

Is there something you're carrying that you've never talked about?

Who is someone you know you could call today if life completely fell apart?

(Let the conversation happen naturally.)

Closing

"I listened to a worship song today called **Simple Gospel**.

It reminded me of something."

"I've been wondering why I don't feel like praising God right now.

Maybe I've been asking the wrong question.

Maybe worship isn't always raising your hands because life feels good.

Maybe worship is simply showing up."

"Opening my Bible...

even when I don't feel like it.

Praying...

even when I don't know what to say.

Calling a trusted friend.

Coming to Stone's Table...

Continuing to walk with God...

even while I'm still hurting."

"I don't think God is asking me to fake joy.

I think He's asking me to keep walking."

Final Scripture

“The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”
— Deuteronomy 33:27

Closing Prayer

“Father,

Thank You for tonight.

Thank You for these young men.

Thank You for giving us a place where we don’t have to pretend.

Help us become the kind of friends who listen before we speak, who love before we judge, and who are willing to simply walk beside one another.

And when life doesn’t make sense…

when our hearts are heavy…

when we don’t have the answers…

remind us that underneath us are Your everlasting arms.

Help us keep showing up.

Help us keep trusting.

Help us keep walking with You.

Amen.”

WHEN ANOTHER MAN TOOK THE FLOOR

That evening, after sharing my own struggles with the boys, I invited Scott to speak. The interesting part was that I hadn't heard what he was going to say.

Scott had offered to share his story and perspective, describing it as an opportunity to respond to me out loud. I trusted him. And I wanted the boys to hear from him. So I sat down alongside them.

For once, I wasn't the man standing in front of the circle with something to teach.

I was there to listen.

Scott began by sharing a story about his grandmother. He spoke about the love he had for her and how, after she passed away, he found himself longing for the friendship they had shared.

I could relate. I had lost my grandmother when I was fourteen. My grandparents had been a significant part of my childhood. They lived with us, and I experienced the kind of nurturing, guidance, friendship, and attention that only a grandparent can provide.

There's something different about a grandparent's love. Not necessarily greater than a mother's or father's love. Just different. And when that relationship is gone, you recognize how much of yourself was shaped by it.

Scott's story resonated with me. But then he began moving the conversation in a direction I hadn't anticipated.

He started talking about Jesus. Not simply the familiar image of a peaceful, soft-spoken man dressed in white robes, with long flowing hair. He began painting a different picture.

A young man with conviction.

A man who stood behind His words. A man who wasn't afraid to challenge the religious establishment. Scott spoke about Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple.

He described a man who wasn't weak or passive, but someone willing to confront wrongdoing. Someone who stood for truth. Someone with a backbone.

And then Scott began describing what it meant to become a warrior for God. He spoke about putting on the armor of God. The breastplate. The sword. The preparation required to stand firm in faith.

Not an invitation to physical violence, but a picture of spiritual strength, discipline, and conviction.

I remember looking around at the boys. These weren't young men unfamiliar with hard work. They had grown up around Steel and Stone.

They worked with their hands. They tore apart engines, built motorcycles, operated equipment, and understood what it meant to put in a hard day's work. Many had calloused hands before they were old enough to appreciate what those hands represented.

And here was Scott, presenting faith in language they could recognize.

Strength. Discipline. Honor. Conviction.

I could see their interest. There was an excitement in their expressions, an appreciation for a picture of Christianity they may not have encountered before.

I remember Austin reflecting on the breastplate of armor. Something about that imagery had connected with him. And it connected with me, too.

Because while Scott was speaking, I was thinking about Stone.

THE WARRIOR I WAS STILL DISCOVERING

I already knew Stone believed in Christ. Angela and I had dedicated our boys to God when they were little. They had been baptized as young children.

And later, after years of attending church and youth group, Steel and Stone made their own decision to publicly affirm their faith through immersion baptism. That ceremony took place outside on the grounds of Crossroads Church, surrounded by family, friends, and members of the congregation.

It was their decision. And it was beautiful. I knew Stone hadn't abandoned that faith.

But there was something I had already carried into my prayers, even before Scott stood before the boys on July 2.

I had prayed that God might allow Stone to carry **two swords.** That he might walk ahead of his brother Steel. That he might protect his friends. That he might

stand against the evil they would encounter in their lives.

It was a father's prayer. A prayer born from love, grief, and the hope that my son's presence in God's kingdom was something far greater than I could comprehend.

So when Scott spoke about spiritual warriors and the armor of God, it resonated with an image I had already carried in my heart.

And there was another discovery waiting for me in Stone's phone.

Among the images he had saved was an illustration of a powerful winged figure, carrying a sword in each hand.

Two swords.

The very image I had imagined when I prayed for my son. **I had made that prayer before discovering this picture.**

I can't explain that coincidence. And I don't need to. But I can tell you what it felt like to discover it.

It felt like another moment of connection with my boy.



An image I discovered on Stone's phone after praying for God to allow Stone to walk before them fighting off the evil that would present itself to Steel and the boys carrying two swords.

I also found other images and Scripture references connected with the idea of spiritual warriors. Some appeared to have been possible tattoo inspirations.

What I was discovering was something different from whether Stone believed.

I was seeing another dimension of the man my son was becoming.

Stone wanted to be tough. He wanted to have honor. He wanted to stand with conviction. And somehow, the imagery of spiritual warriors resonated with him.

Scott also shared a personal belief about God calling His children home. As I remember it, he spoke about

the possibility that when God knows someone has received the knowledge and understanding intended for them, that person may be ready to come home.

I wish I could remember his exact words. They were beautiful. And they reached me in a way I hadn't expected.

I don't claim to know why God called Stone home. I don't believe any of us can fully understand that. But hearing Scott speak about a young man's spiritual readiness brought me comfort.

Because I knew Stone. I knew his heart. I knew the kind of young man he was becoming.

Not as a life that had simply ended too soon, but as a young man whose faith and conviction still meant something beyond the years he had been given.

Since May 9, several of Stone's friends have survived frightening accidents. One rolled his car into a ravine and had to be medically air evacuated. Another laid his motorcycle down. And another lost control of his vehicle on a rainy evening, went off the road into dens woods along side a river, and somehow they walked away, some without a scratch.

I've seen photographs of the damages. And I've wondered how they survived.

More than once, the boys and I have spoken about Stone being with them. I cannot tell you exactly what happens beyond this life. But I can tell you what those moments have meant to us.

They have given us reasons to be grateful. Reasons to pray. And reasons to continue believing that the love Stone shared with his friends remains part of their lives today.

I don't have all the answers.

That was the title of our lesson. And somehow, by the end of that evening, I was becoming more comfortable admitting it.

THE STARTING LINE

I remember lying in bed that Thursday night, thinking about Scott's message. Thinking about the boys. Thinking about Stone. And thinking about what was beginning to happen around our fire.

Something had changed. Not necessarily in the boys.

In me.

I had started Stone's Table because I wanted to give these young men a place to gather. A place to share a meal. A place to talk. A place where they could remember their friend and know they weren't alone.

But after that evening, I recognized that I wanted to give them more. I wanted to be prepared. I wanted our conversations to have purpose. And I wanted to take seriously the responsibility I had accepted when I invited them into this fellowship.

That night, I made a commitment to myself.

Every Thursday, I would have a lesson prepared.

And preparing that lesson would require more than sitting down a few hours before the boys arrived. I began working on my lessons on Saturdays.

I'd spend the following days reading, thinking, researching, writing, and carrying conversations with friends. By Wednesday evening, I was usually bringing the lesson together. And Thursday afternoon? Well, there were almost always a few final touches.

I wasn't becoming softer. If anything, I felt myself digging in deeper. Like a runner approaching the starting line.

There's something about that moment before a race. You've trained. You've prepared. You've put in the work. And now you're standing there, waiting for the opportunity to use everything you've learned.

That's how I felt. For years, I'd enjoyed having meaningful conversations with friends. Conversations where we could challenge one another's thinking without becoming offended.

Where we could disagree without surrendering our convictions. Where we could stand behind what we believed without pushing one another away.

I had spent a lifetime learning how to have those conversations. And suddenly, I understood something.

I had been training for this race my entire life.

I wasn't standing at the starting line wondering whether I belonged there. I felt qualified. Not because I had all the answers. But because I had spent my life learning

how to ask questions, listen, understand, and stand behind what I believed.

And now I had a purpose for those experiences. These boys. This fellowship. This opportunity to honor Stone by continuing to invest in the young men he loved.

I could feel the calling. I could feel the responsibility. And for the first time, I recognized that this wasn't simply something I wanted to do.

It was something I was ready to commit myself to doing.

I dug my feet into the starting line.

And I got ready to push off.

LESSON 05



LESSON 06

Two Months — What We Carry Forward

FRONT OF STONE

Photograph placeholder

THE REFLECTION

July 9 marked two months since we lost Stone. It also happened to fall on a Thursday, the evening we had naturally established for gathering at Stone's Table.

That evening, we gathered inside around the dining table. I remember it being hot outside, and I believe everyone was enjoying the air conditioning. The table was full, with the boys seated all around it.

I had pulled a tall chair over from the kitchen island and was sitting off to the corner, across from Jake. Angela was at the head of the table, to Jake's right.

Jake had suggested we spend the evening sharing our favorite memories and experiences with Stone, and he was the first to speak.

He recalled meeting Steel and Stone and shared a memory from the loft that had stayed with him.

He remembered sitting beside Stone when Stone put his arm around his shoulder, leaned in, and started singing **"Rooster" by Alice in Chains.** The two of them sang at the top of their lungs.

Jake told us that it was the first time he could remember feeling truly **welcomed and that he belonged to a group.**

Through Steel and Stone, he had been introduced to so many wonderful people and friendships. He told us that **they had changed his life.**

I had always suspected Jake felt close to the boys and appreciated being around them. They had even helped

him get a job working alongside them at Remes Auto Body. If I remember correctly, they had approached their uncle about hiring Jake the previous summer, and he started shortly afterward.

But hearing Jake explain what their friendship meant to him really sank in.

I remember feeling **proud of both my sons** for the kindness and compassion they had shown Jake.

Steel and Stone knew what it felt like to have a brother they loved, someone they could rely on and confide in. I believe they both enjoyed offering that same companionship to someone they felt deserved it.

There was another part of Jake's story that meant something special to me.

“Rooster” was one of Stone's favorite songs.

Whenever Stone and I listened to it together, he would often bring up Papa. Stone associated the song's Vietnam War story with his grandfather, whose bravery and honor he had always admired.

I can still imagine Stone singing that song with his arm around Jake, completely comfortable being himself, letting Jake into his world.

And now, because Jake shared that memory, the song carries another connection for all of us.

What had already been a meaningful song between Stone and me became part of someone else's story, too.

After Jake finished, the conversation naturally moved around the table as others began sharing their own memories.

I didn't need to force the discussion. The boys were comfortable sharing their experiences with Stone and listening to one another.

Looking back, Jake's story was a beautiful example of what I had hoped we would discover that evening.

What do we carry forward from the people we love?

For Jake, it was the feeling of being welcomed, accepted, and included.

For me, it was another opportunity to recognize the compassion my sons had for others and the difference their friendships could make in someone's life.

Hearing Jake share that evening deepened my own relationship with him.

Ever since, Jake has been like family to me.

BEFORE THE LESSON

As you read through the original lessons that follow my reflections sometimes with a story, you may notice something a little different about the way I've written and formatted it.

I'm new to writing messages intended to be shared aloud, especially with a group of young men gathered around a table.

These weren't originally written to become chapters in a book. They were my way of organizing my thoughts and preparing myself to lead a conversation.

The larger lettering, bold words, and spacing helped me find my place, emphasize certain thoughts, and keep the message moving naturally.

You'll also come across notes I've written to myself. Things like **"Stop talking," "Give them time,"** or reminders not to fill every silence.

Those weren't part of the message I intended to read aloud. They were reminders to myself to **listen**, to let the boys share their thoughts, and to remember that I didn't need to have all the answers.

I've chosen to leave those notes and the original formatting in place because they're part of how these lessons were prepared and delivered.

I was learning how to do this as we went along.

And as you'll discover, **I was learning just as much from the boys as I was hoping they might learn from me.**

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE - The Fellowship Project
Thursday, July 9, 2026
Two Months #06
"What We Carry Forward"

GATHER AROUND THE TABLE

Once everyone has food and we are together

I want to start tonight with a short verse.

OPENING SCRIPTURE

"I thank my God every time I remember you." — Philippians 1:3

OPENING

Today is two months since we lost Stone. I'm not going to pretend that number is easy for me to say, because it isn't. But somehow, today landed on a Thursday—the day we've naturally started gathering around Stone's Table. And Jake suggested that we talk about our best experiences with Stone and why they were good experiences.

The more I thought about that, the more I realized something. Maybe tonight isn't really about finding the *best* memory. Because how do you rank memories of somebody you love? Maybe it's about asking what that memory left behind in you.

Why did that moment matter?

Did Stone make you **laugh** when you needed it?

Did he make you feel **included**?

Did he **challenge** you?

Did he do something completely **stupid** that still **makes** you **smile**?

Did he **show up**?

Did he make an **ordinary day become something** you still R**emember**?

Because **maybe** the **real** gift of a **memory isn't** only that we get to **look backward**.

Maybe it also teaches us how to **move forward**.

*WHAT WE CARRY FORWARD

Every one of us is becoming who we are through the people we encounter. **Some** experiences are **good**. **Some** are **painful**. **Some change us** without us even knowing it at the time.

Stone changed me because he was my **son**. But he also changed **each** of you differently. And here's what I want us to think about tonight:

If there was something good in Stone that affected you, what would happen if you carried that part of him forward into somebody else's life?

If he made you feel included—include somebody.

If he made you laugh—bring joy to somebody who needs it.

If he showed up for you—show up for somebody.

If he pushed you—push somebody you love toward something better.

If he made you feel like you belonged—make sure another person knows they belong.

FROM ME — AS STONE'S DAD

I can't bring my son back. There is nothing I can say tonight that changes that. And I know each of you lost somebody too. You didn't lose him the same way I did, but that doesn't mean your loss isn't real.

What I am beginning to understand is that I still get to see pieces of Stone. I see them when you walk through that door. I hear them in your stories. I see them in the way you give me a hug, sit at this table, laugh together, and keep showing up.

And I want you to know something:

you do not have to protect me from your memories of Stone.

You can say his name here. You can laugh about him here. You can cry here. You can tell a story I've never heard—even if it's something you think a dad probably shouldn't know.

TONIGHT'S QUESTION

"Share an experience with Stone that stays with you—and if you can, tell us why you think it stayed."

Stop talking.

Do not rush to fill the silence.

Give them time.

DISCUSSION

"Let whoever wants to go first begin."

There is no need to go around the table in order unless the group naturally wants to.

If someone shares a story, listen first.

Ask questions when you genuinely want to know more.

Let the boys talk to each other—not only to me.

IF THE CONVERSATION NEEDS HELP

Only use these if needed.

What was it about that moment that stayed with you?

Was there something about Stone in that story that you didn't recognize until now?

Did that experience change anything about you?

Did Stone make you feel seen, included, challenged, or understood?

Is there something from that memory you think you carry with you today?

Use only what feels natural.

THE DEEPER QUESTION

After several stories have been shared, if the moment feels right, bring them back to this:

If there was something good in Stone that affected you, <u>what</u> would happen if you <u>carried</u> that part of him <u>forward</u> <u>into somebody else's life?</u>

If he made you feel included—include somebody.

If he made you laugh—bring joy to somebody who needs it.

If he showed up for you—show up for somebody.

If he pushed you—push somebody you love toward something better.

If he made you feel like you belonged—make sure another person knows they belong.

CLOSING SCRIPTURE

When the conversation has naturally run its course:

"Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing." — 1 Thessalonians 5:11

CLOSING THOUGHT

Maybe this table is one of the ways we carry him forward. Not by trying to recreate Stone. Not by pretending he's still here. But by taking whatever was good, loving, funny, loyal, stubborn, generous, or unforgettable about him—and letting some of that goodness keep moving through us.

Two months ago today, we lost Stone.

But tonight, because all of you came back to this table, I'm reminded that love doesn't simply disappear. Sometimes it changes form. Sometimes it becomes a story. Sometimes it becomes a lesson. Sometimes it becomes a Thursday night around a table.

And maybe sometimes, it becomes the way we choose to show up for each other from here forward.

CLOSING PRAYER

God,

Thank You for this table.

Thank You for every person sitting around it tonight.

Thank You for Stone, for his life, for the memories we carry, for the laughter he gave us, for the ways he challenged us, and for the ways he changed us.

Help us not only remember what was good in him, but carry that goodness forward.

Where Stone made someone feel included, help us include others.

Where he brought laughter, help us bring joy.

Where he showed up, help us show up.

Where he made someone feel like they belonged, help us do the same.

Be close to every person here tonight, especially in the places we do not always know how to talk about.

Thank You for giving us this place to gather.

Thank You for these Thursday nights.

Thank You for the love that brought us here and the love that continues through us.

Amen.

FINAL REMINDER FOR MYSELF

The boys themselves can become the sermon.
Jake opened the door.
I can give them a safe framework, Scripture, permission to laugh and cry, and then allow Stone's life to speak through the people who knew him.

I do not need to force tonight.
I do not need to fill every silence.
I do not need to have all the answers.
I only need to be present.
And let the table do what it was created to do.

LESSON 06

BACK OF STONE

Photograph placeholder

LESSON 07

The Weight We Carry



THE REFLECTION

The Weight We Carry

The days leading up to this gathering were difficult.

There seemed to be an endless number of things weighing on my mind. Some were responsibilities that needed attention. Others were emotions I hadn't figured out how to manage.

And I was beginning to recognize just how easily one concern could find its way into another.

I had been thinking about bringing Stone's Corvette home from storage. I wanted to make room for it in the third bay of our garage, where I could keep it close and eventually spend time working on it.

It was something I wanted to accomplish, but what seemed like a manageable project became another source of frustration within a household already carrying more than its share.

During the days leading up to Thursday, Angela and Steel had found themselves in a difficult disagreement. Emotions were running high, and although I wasn't directly involved in their conversation, I somehow found myself caught in the middle of it.

I was already carrying more than I knew what to do with, and suddenly there was something else weighing heavily on my heart.

I struggled with how to respond.

Only a few weeks earlier, Steel had given me one of the most sincere and meaningful Father's Day cards he'd ever written.

And now, in the middle of an emotionally difficult week, I was trying to reconcile the love I knew so well with emotions that had surfaced under circumstances none of us were prepared to navigate.

I turned to my own father for some guidance.

I asked him which words I should hold on to—the ones expressed during an emotional moment or those Steel had taken the time to write from his heart.

Without missing a beat, Dad answered:

"You file the one that was written in love."

There was something profoundly simple about his response.

He wasn't asking me to ignore what had happened. He was reminding me that a lifetime of love shouldn't be measured against a single difficult moment.

And I knew the love my son had for me.

Still, I wanted to find a way to respond that wouldn't add to the weight Steel was already carrying.

I understood that my son was grieving deeply. What I needed was guidance on how to navigate my own emotions while continuing to be the father he needed.

So I reached out to my dear friend **Randy**, who, along with his wife **Kathleen**, had experienced the loss of a young son more than ten years earlier. Like Angela

and me, they had other children who were left navigating the loss of their brother.

Randy and Kathleen had become dear friends to both Angela and me. They had spent many hours with us, sharing their experiences, offering understanding, and helping us navigate a kind of grief they knew all too well.

I knew Randy and Kathleen had walked through circumstances painfully familiar to what we were now facing.

I specifically sought Randy's guidance because I wanted to understand how to respond without making an already difficult situation harder for Steel.

What Randy shared with me that day gave me a perspective on my son's grief that I hadn't previously considered.

He helped me recognize something important about the difference between a parent's experience of losing a child and a sibling's experience of losing a brother.

As parents, we have a before, a middle, and an after.

I had a life before I met Angela.

Angela and I had experiences together before we decided to have children.

And then we had the years of raising our boys, watching them grow, and building a family together.

All those years gave us experiences, memories, relationships, and some emotional understanding of the world.

None of it could have prepared us for losing Stone.

But we had lived a life before becoming his parents.

Steel hadn't lived a life without Stone.

At least not one he could meaningfully remember.

Our boys were only twenty-one months apart.

From Steel's earliest memories, Stone was there.

His brother.

His best friend.

His playmate, project buddy, sounding board, counselor, and consoler.

They had grown up sharing nearly every stage of life together.

And perhaps most importantly, they had always been one of the most attainable sources of unconditional love for one another.

How does a young man begin to understand a world without someone who has been part of nearly every moment of his life?

That question changed something in me.

I had been looking at Steel's grief through the eyes of a father who had lost his son.

Randy helped me recognize that Steel was experiencing the loss of someone who had been beside him for almost his entire existence.

His brother wasn't simply someone he loved.

Stone was part of everything Steel had ever known about being Steel.

And now he was being asked to find his way forward without him.

I began to understand that some of the anger and frustration surfacing in our family might have had very little to do with the circumstances bringing those emotions to the surface.

Perhaps the people closest to us were simply the most accessible places for those emotions to land.

And that brought me to a realization I hadn't expected.

I had been feeling helpless as a father.

I couldn't take away my son's grief.

I couldn't give him back his brother.

And no matter how desperately I wanted to help him, I couldn't seem to find anything that would make his circumstances better.

But during my conversation with Randy, something began to click.

I remember telling him that if allowing some of Steel's anger to fall on me meant I could somehow help my son through what he was experiencing, **then I was strong enough to carry that.**

It didn't mean I believed every emotional reaction was justified.

It didn't mean my own feelings no longer mattered.

It meant I had finally recognized something I could offer my son when I had been feeling as though I had nothing to give.

I could give him patience.

I could give him understanding.

I could give him room to experience what he needed to feel without demanding that he explain himself or understand my feelings in return.

And I didn't have to turn that realization into a teaching moment between father and son.

For once, helping didn't require me to fix anything.

It required me to recognize what he was carrying and be willing to carry a little more myself.

That conversation with Randy didn't take away the sadness or resolve the difficult circumstances surrounding our family.

But it changed how I wanted to respond.

And perhaps, without realizing it at the time, it was teaching me something about the very fellowship I had been trying to build around Stone's Table.

And there was still more happening that week.

Wednesday brought a meeting with an attorney regarding Stone's probate estate.

I left that meeting extremely dissatisfied.

I had expected compassion and attention to detail from someone whose professional services we needed during one of the most difficult periods of our lives.

I didn't feel we had received either.

Angela was exhausted.

I was exhausted.

We were navigating responsibilities that came with losing our son while still trying to comprehend that he was gone.

There was no instruction manual for any of it.

I had also been considering taking a trip alone, hoping that some solitude might offer an opportunity for healing.

When I presented the idea to Angela, it wasn't received as I had hoped.

Another conversation became heated.

We had too many irons in the fire, and both of us were getting burned trying to handle them.

What followed was a disagreement that lasted nearly five hours.

Frustrations surfaced that had little to do with the subject that initially brought them into the conversation.

There were misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and emotions that neither of us had managed particularly well.

We were both carrying so much.

And somewhere along the way, we began allowing that weight to affect how we treated one another.

But eventually, we found our way back.

Through conversation, understanding, forgiveness, and the love that has carried us through our marriage.

Angela and I have never had a marriage without disagreements.

But over the years, we've learned something about the importance of finding our way back to one another.

Repairing what we've damaged matters more than winning the argument.

That doesn't always come easily.

Sometimes pride gets in the way.

Sometimes we have to acknowledge that the feelings we experienced were real, but the way we expressed them wasn't justified.

And sometimes the hardest part is simply admitting that we were wrong.

As Thursday approached, I began recognizing how closely all these experiences were connected.

My conversations with my father and Randy had helped me understand the weight someone else might be carrying.

My disagreement with Angela had reminded me how easily I could mishandle the weight I was carrying myself.

Understanding another person's pain and taking responsibility for our own behavior are both necessary parts of loving one another.

I wasn't proud of everything that had happened that week.

But I was learning.

And there was too much value in those discoveries to leave them sitting inside me.

I felt a calling on my heart to bring that understanding to Stone's Table.

That Thursday evening, I shared some of what Angela and I had experienced with the young men around the fire.

I wanted them to understand that no matter how old we become, we're never beyond making mistakes.

We can still lose our patience.

We can still misdirect our frustration.

We can still hurt the very people we love most.

But we can also recognize what we've done.

Own it.

Acknowledge the damage.

Ask for forgiveness.

And make the effort to do better.

Because healing has a difficult time beginning when pride refuses to make room for it.

I wasn't approaching the Table as someone who had mastered these lessons.

I was approaching it as someone who had spent the week learning them.

And perhaps that was becoming one of the most important parts of our fellowship.

I didn't have to have everything figured out to have something worth sharing.

I only needed to be willing to recognize what life was teaching me and honest enough to share it.

That became the foundation for our seventh gathering.

The Weight We Carry.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE - The Fellowship Project
Thursday, July 16th, 2026

Stone's Table #7

"The Weight We Carry"

Self notes and direction

This past week has given me something every man here will experience sooner or later—not grief specifically, but what pain does to us if we don't recognize it soon enough.

The three devotionals I came across the past few weeks almost read like chapters of the same lesson.

July 9: Worry clouds our thinking until we stop hearing God's voice.

July 15: Don't carry tomorrow's burdens today; God's grace is given one day at a time.

July 16: If we let hurt become self-pity, we sink deeper instead of looking up.

I think there's another thread tying all three together:

Unchecked thoughts become emotions.
Unchecked emotions become words.
Unchecked words become wounds.

That isn't just about worry. It's about anger too.

Opening

"Tonight marks another milestone.

Last week was two months since Stone left us.

Today is two months since we stood together at his celebration of life.

I don't want tonight to be about sadness.

I want it to be about something every one of us will face—not just because we've lost Stone—but because we're human."

"I've learned something this week that wasn't easy to admit.

Sometimes the person we're upset with...
isn't actually the person we're angry at.

Sometimes we're carrying stress...
fear...
grief...
pressure...
disappointment...

and then someone says one little thing...

and they become the one who receives everything we've been carrying."

"Has anybody ever done that?"

My Story

"I realized this week that I let frustration escape through the wrong door.

The frustration itself may have been real.

The feelings were real.

But the target wasn't.

And that's a hard thing to admit.

Sometimes we convince ourselves that because our feelings are real...
our reaction must be justified.
They're not always the same thing."

The Snowball

"I've noticed something about my own mind.
It almost never starts with anger.
It starts with a thought.
One thought.
Then another.
Then another.
Pretty soon I've built a whole story in my head.
By the time I speak...
I'm not responding to one moment anymore.
I'm responding to the twenty conversations I've already had with myself."

I don't know if anybody else has ever won an argument in their own head before it even happened.

But that's dangerous.
Because the other person doesn't even know the conversation you've already had.

Bring in the Devotional
Read a portion from July 9.

"Stop worrying long enough to hear My voice..."

Then say:

"I don't think this only applies to worry.
I think anger creates just as much noise.

When I'm angry...

I stop listening.

Not just to God.

To my wife.

To my family.

To my friends.

To the person standing right in front of me."

Read one paragraph from July 15.

"My grace is sufficient for one day at a time..."

"I wonder how much of our anger comes from carrying yesterday into today...

or dragging tomorrow back into today.

We weren't designed to carry all of it at once."

Finally read the first paragraph from July 16.

"I don't think self-pity always looks like feeling sorry for yourself.

Sometimes it looks like believing you're the only one carrying something hard.

The truth is...

every person sitting around this table tonight is carrying something."

Repair

"This week reminded me of something important.

Being a good man isn't about never losing your temper.

It's about recognizing it.

Owning it.
Apologizing for it.
Learning from it.
And trying to do better next time.
Apologies don't erase what happened.
But they tell someone,
'You're more important to me than my pride.'"

Friendships
"That's actually why Stone's Table exists.
Not because we're perfect.
Not because we always say the right thing.
But because every Thursday we get another chance to sharpen each other.
To remind each other we're not carrying life alone."
Look around the circle.
"I want every one of you to know something.
You matter here.
Your voice matters.
Your struggles matter.
Your victories matter.
If you disappear next Thursday...
someone here notices."
That wasn't true for all of us six months ago.
Today it is.
And that's a gift."

Discussion

"I've got a few questions tonight.

No pressure to answer every one.

Just whatever speaks to you."

Have you ever taken your frustration out on someone who didn't deserve it?

What's usually underneath your anger?

Is apologizing difficult for you? Why?

Has someone ever apologized to you in a way you'll never forget?

What helps you calm down before saying something you'll regret?

What kind of friend do you need most right now?

Closing

"I'll leave you with this.

Every one of us is going to fail.

Every one of us is going to say something we wish we could take back.

But our mistakes don't define us.

Our willingness to own them does.

God doesn't ask us to be perfect.

He asks us to keep bringing our hearts back to Him."

Read Matthew 6:34:

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Closing

with a simple prayer asking God to help everyone at the table hear His voice above the noise of worry, anger, pride, and fear, and to make them men who are quick to listen, slow to speak, and humble enough to ask forgiveness when they fail.

"I didn't choose this topic because I figured it out this week. I chose it because I didn't. God had to remind me that even after all these Thursdays together, I'm still learning too. If I ever stand up here pretending I've mastered these lessons, then I've missed the whole point of why we're here."

TO MY SON, STEEL

Steel,

There are things in this life I wish I could protect you from. Things I wish I could fix, burdens I wish I could lift from your shoulders, and moments I would give anything to make easier for you.

But I've come to understand that being your father doesn't mean I'll always have the answers or know how to make things better.

Sometimes all I can do is love you through what neither of us knows how to change.

I know the weight you carry is different from mine. I know there are parts of your grief I'll never fully understand, just as there are parts of mine that may be difficult for you to comprehend.

And that's okay.

You don't have to explain your pain to me. You don't have to hide your anger, your sadness, or the moments when life feels unfair.

You don't have to be strong for me.

I've loved you from the moment you entered this world, and nothing that has happened—or ever will happen—can take that love away.

We'll have our disagreements. We'll misunderstand each other. There may be moments when neither of us has the right words.

But I want you to know something that will never change.

My love for you is not measured by the ease of our relationship, the words we exchange, or how well we understand one another.

It's unconditional.

It doesn't need to be earned, and it cannot be lost.

You and your brother have given me the greatest privilege of my life.

Being your dad.

And although I cannot walk every road for you, I promise that as long as I am here, you will never have to wonder whether your father loves you.

Not for a moment.

I love you, Steel.

Always have. Always will.

Dad

LESSON 07


BE Kind
EVERYONE Carries
a hidden burden
Corinthians 12:9
My grace is
sufficient for You...
A.A

LESSON 08

Finding Your Direction



THE REFLECTION

Going Fishing for a Dream

On June 13, just over a month after losing Stone, I found myself dreaming about getting out on the open road.

I'd been looking at a **2001 red Volkswagen EuroVan Westfalia**, complete with a camper top. I imagined traveling across America, perhaps pulling my motorcycle behind me, stopping wherever I wanted, and spending time beneath unfamiliar skies.

I wasn't entirely certain what I was searching for.

Maybe solitude. Maybe peace. Maybe an opportunity to get away from familiar surroundings where nearly everything reminded me of what was missing.

I'd written in my journal that I saw traveling as an opportunity to **heal and remap my brain**.

I didn't know exactly what that meant or whether it would work.

But for the first time in weeks, I was allowing myself to get excited about something.

I've always been the dreamer in our family. The one imagining another adventure, another project, another possibility.

Angela has always provided the practicality and stability that helped turn many of those dreams into something real.

Our boys grew up with both sides of that relationship.

And now I was trying to understand how to continue dreaming when the future I'd imagined for our family had changed so dramatically.

Three days later, Steel and I went fishing.

Not for bass. Not for walleye.

We went fishing for a Volkswagen.

A Day With Steel

On June 16, Steel and I headed out to inspect that red EuroVan.

I trusted his mechanical knowledge, and I wanted him there to help me determine whether this twenty-five-year-old vehicle was worth bringing home.

We spent nearly the entire day investigating that van.

We had it on a lift, crawled underneath it, inspected every corner, and made the dealership work for every answer they gave us.

Steel was relentless.

Every part, every component, every concern. He wanted to know about it.

We took it for a test drive, evaluating how it performed and paying attention to anything that might become a problem once we got it out on the open road.

Throughout the inspection, more than once, we found ourselves asking:

"What would Stone say?"

It felt natural.

The three of us had shared years of conversations about automobiles, mechanical work, and projects. Stone would have had plenty to say about this one.

We weren't trying to manufacture his presence.

He was simply still part of the conversation.

Steel and I built an itemized cost sheet of everything we'd discovered.

Some concerns were expected for a vehicle of that age.

A minor oil leak. Torn camper canvas. Broken armrests. Various maintenance issues.

We also found rust repairs concealed with fiberglass.

And then there was the transmission.

That was a legitimate concern.

It wasn't something either of us was willing to overlook.

After spending hours examining the vehicle and driving it, we decided to step away from the dealership for a while.

We went to lunch.

It gave us an opportunity to regroup, discuss what we'd found, assess the repairs, and consider what we wanted to do next.

We weren't simply deciding whether we liked the van.

We were trying to determine whether it could become the dependable adventure vehicle I'd been imagining, and what it would realistically take to get it there.

And I wasn't making that assessment alone.

Steel had his own observations, his own concerns, and his own understanding of what needed attention.

We were working through the decision together.

There was still enough interest to continue investigating.

So we returned to the dealership.

The dealership was going to investigate the transmission problem, and **Steel wanted to be present when they examined it, particularly to inspect the transmission fluid before it was discarded.**

That was his area of expertise.

I know my way around a vehicle. I'd spent plenty of time working on cars when I was his age. But the mechanical knowledge my boys had developed over the years had grown well beyond what I could offer them.

And I was perfectly comfortable with that.

In fact, I enjoyed it.

At this stage of my life, I found more satisfaction in watching their abilities develop than in trying to demonstrate my own.

I could still contribute plenty to the experience.

I understood the importance of patience, asking the right questions, listening carefully to the answers, and

knowing when someone wasn't giving us the information we needed.

Steel could evaluate the mechanical condition of the vehicle. I could help us evaluate the situation surrounding the purchase.

Neither contribution was more important than the other.

They simply complemented one another.

And that was what made the day so enjoyable.

I wasn't there to tell Steel what he should be seeing.

I was there to give him the opportunity to show me what he already knew.

After the transmission inspection, we took the van out for another test drive.

Even knowing what we'd discovered, we hadn't completely ruled it out.

We knew it needed work.

And between the two of us, we had the knowledge and ability to handle much of that work.

But there was a difference between purchasing a reliable vehicle for traveling across America and purchasing another project.

The price had to reflect that difference.

We began negotiating with the dealership manager.

And we got close.

Very close.

The young salesman had been pleasant. The manager had been reasonable enough to work with.

For a while, it appeared we might actually reach an agreement.

Then the owner came out.

And the conversation changed.

He wasn't interested in negotiating around the condition of the vehicle.

Instead, he continued explaining how much money the dealership already had invested in it from purchasing it at auction.

He wanted us to pay more because they had paid too much.

That didn't make much sense to me.

We had spent hours examining the van, discovered legitimate problems, and returned to give the dealership an opportunity to investigate them further.

We weren't trying to take advantage of anyone.

We were simply trying to make a reasonable purchase based on what the vehicle was actually worth.

And despite everything we'd discovered, **we were still willing to work toward a deal**.

But the owner's attitude made it increasingly clear that we weren't going to get anywhere.

What bothered me wasn't simply the price.

It was the character of the negotiation.

He seemed more concerned with recovering his investment than acknowledging the condition of what he was selling.

And I wasn't interested in paying for another man's poor investment.

Eventually, I'd heard enough.

I told him:

"Look, I didn't come here to do this. I came here to find a reliable van. This isn't one. I'll have to make a project out of it, which would be fine if that's what I wanted because my son and I can do all of that work. But that wasn't the purpose of this purchase. You're asking me to pay more than it's worth because you overpaid for it. That's not my problem."

I'd come there hoping to purchase a vehicle, not spend the afternoon arguing over somebody else's financial decisions.

I thanked him for his time.

Told him to call me in three weeks if it hadn't sold.

Or don't.

And with that, Steel and I walked away.

No anger.

No regret.

Just confidence.

We'd done our homework.

We'd investigated the vehicle thoroughly.

We'd given the dealership an opportunity to address the concerns.

And we'd made a decision we both felt comfortable with.

There wasn't anything left to negotiate with someone unwilling to meet us somewhere reasonable.

We climbed into Steel's truck and shut the doors.

Both of us were feeling that adrenaline rush that comes after standing your ground.

We looked at each other.

High-fived.

And started laughing.

Steel had a grin on his face.

"Dad, you kicked their ass."

I laughed and told him:

"No. We did. It was your confidence and knowledge that got us there."

And I meant it.

I was proud of Steel.

Not simply because he knew what to look for mechanically.

Not because he'd helped negotiate.

And not because he'd agreed with me.

I was proud because he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with me as a man.

That meant something to me.

For years, I'd watched my boys grow, learn, work, and develop their own abilities.

But that afternoon, I wasn't simply bringing my son along to look at a vehicle.

I had a partner.

Someone whose knowledge I respected.

Someone whose judgment I trusted.

Someone who contributed to the experience in ways that genuinely mattered.

And I enjoyed every bit of it.

On the drive home, we both agreed we'd had fun.

Then I said something that stayed with me.

"We should just keep doing this."

Because that's exactly what it had felt like.

Fishing.

You don't have to catch something every time you go fishing.

Sometimes you spend the entire day on the water without bringing home a thing.

But you enjoyed the conversations.

You learned something.

You spent time with someone you love.

And when the day is over, you realize the experience itself was worth the trip.

That's how I felt driving home with Steel.

The van was still sitting at the dealership.

But we'd spent the day together, solving problems, making decisions, sharing a few laughs, and enjoying one another's company.

The experience with Steel had genuinely become more valuable than the purchase itself.

We had gone looking for a camper van.

We came home with another memory together.

And throughout that day, Stone had remained part of our conversations.

The Complicated Road of Fatherhood

Looking back, I find something particularly meaningful about that experience.

Only a month later, Steel and I would find ourselves navigating a difficult week in our relationship, one that contributed to the thoughts I brought to Stone's Table for Lesson 07.

It would have been easy to look at those two experiences as contradictions.

But they weren't.

Grief doesn’t progress neatly from anger to acceptance to happiness. Neither does fatherhood.

Sometimes those experiences overlap.

I could look back on a beautiful day spent with Steel, laughing together, working together, and feeling proud of the man standing beside me. Yet only weeks later, find myself struggling through some of the very emotions that make being a father so difficult.

One experience didn't erase the other.

They were both part of our relationship. Both part of learning how to move forward in a life neither of us had imagined living without Stone.

The Road Ahead

By the time July 23 arrived, my thoughts about traveling had continued to evolve.

What had begun as the possibility of taking a motorcycle trip across America had grown into the idea of a camper van, and eventually perhaps a Class C motorhome.

I'd spent countless hours researching vehicles, looking at maps, and imagining places I might visit.

The Pacific Coast Highway had particular meaning.

It was a journey I'd dreamed of taking with **both Steel and Stone**.

Now I was considering making some version of that journey alone.

But I was also beginning to recognize something about the experience I'd shared with Steel.

I'd spent so much time thinking about where I wanted to go that I hadn't necessarily considered what I might discover along the way.

That day at the dealership hadn't taken me anywhere near the open road I'd been dreaming about.

Yet it had given me something valuable.

A day with my son.

A shared adventure.

An opportunity to appreciate the relationship we were continuing to build.

And perhaps that was part of what I needed to recognize as I searched for direction.

I still didn't know whether I'd purchase a camper van, a motorhome, or eventually take that trip on my motorcycle.

I didn't know where the road would lead or what I might find when I got there.

But I was beginning to understand that **not every worthwhile journey requires arriving at the destination you originally imagined.**

Sometimes the experience itself is worth pursuing.

Sometimes the people traveling alongside you matter more than where you're going.

And sometimes you have to be willing to change direction.

Those thoughts were among the many questions I carried into Stone's Table on July 23.

I wanted to talk with the boys about the direction their own lives were taking.

But I was still trying to understand mine.

And perhaps that was reason enough for us to have the conversation together.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE - The Fellowship Project
Thursday, July 23rd, 2026

Stone's Table #08

"Finding Your Direction"

Opening Prayer...

Notes to Self:

I spent a while rereading my notes from last night. I actually don't think the lesson is about journeys which was where I was originally building from. That was the doorway. The lesson tonight is about finding your direction.

I spent almost an hour writing about road trips, motorhomes, my relationship with Steel, hearing God, Stoicism, Stone's legacy, and wondering what these boys actually need. Every one of those conversations came back to one question:

"How do I know I'm walking the right path?"

Thats when I realize that is a relatable question a 20-year-old understands every bit as much as a 50-year-old.

* *They're choosing careers.*
* *They're choosing friends.*
* *They're choosing girlfriends.*
* *They're deciding whether to drink.*
* *They're deciding whether faith matters.*
* *They're deciding who they want to become.*

LOL... I'm choosing a motorhome.

It's the exact same question isn't it?.

Opening

"Good to see all your faces this evening.

Last Thursday was one of my favorite Stone's Tables we've had.

Something happened that honestly made me smile all weekend.

For the first time since we've started these dinners...

nobody had a beer from what I remember.

Nobody needed one.

Nobody suggested one.

Nobody cared.

We simply sat around this table...
and talked.

I don't say that because drinking is wrong.
Most of you know I enjoy a beer once in a while.

I say it because...

the fellowship became enough.

That meant more to me than you probably realize."

———

Kick off Scripture

Proverbs 16:9

"In their hearts humans plan their course,
but the Lord establishes their steps."

^*Read it twice...*

"I've been thinking about this verse almost nonstop this week."

———

My Journey

"Some of you know...

since losing Stone...

I've had this desire to take a solo trip across America.

At first...
it was going to be on my motorcycle.

Then it became maybe a camper van.

Then maybe a Class C motorhome.

Then maybe something different.

I've spent countless hours researching. Some of that is because I haven't had anything since May 9th that my mind has found peace with that has allowed to get lost in where I wasn't thinking of this emptiness.

Looking at maps.

Looking at RVs.

Dreaming about mountain roads. A ride **I had always dreamt** of taking with Steel & Stone

The "Pacific Coast Highway".

National Parks.

Mt Rushmore.

Just...

driving."

"And then this verse hit me.

I've been planning **my course**...

but maybe **God's** more interested in **establishing my steps**."

———

Transition

"That made me wonder...

maybe life isn't about figuring out the entire trip.

Maybe it's about taking the next right step."

———

Personal Reflection

"I've also been reading a lot about Stoicism.

I appreciate a lot of what it teaches.

Responsibility.

Self-control.

Accepting hardship.

Those are all valuable things.

But something has felt...
empty."

"Stoicism tells us to become strong enough to stand alone.

Christianity tells us...
we were never supposed to."

———

Talk About God

"One thing that frustrates me about Christianity...

is that we're told to listen for God.

But if I'm being honest...

I've only felt God clearly speak to me a handful of times in my life. Where I know with **no Doubt** that I heard his voice

I wish it happened every day.

It doesn't.

But every one of those moments...

changed my direction."

"Sometimes I wonder...

if God speaks more through people...

than through voices.

Look around the room.

Maybe that's why we're sitting here."

———

Stone

"That got me thinking this week...

I found myself asking...

What would Stone want us talking about tonight?

If he walked through that door...

sat down...

and took over this conversation...

what would he bring up?"

Let silence sit.

———

Discussion

Going around the table.

1.

If Stone were leading tonight...
what do you think he'd want us talking about?

———

2.

What direction do you feel your life is heading right now?

Not your destination...

Your **direction**.

———

3.

Is that direction something **you** chose...

or something you've just **drifted** into?

———

4.

What is one next step...

–not five years from now–

that you know you should take?

———

5.

What gives you confidence that you're walking in the right direction?

Faith?

Parents?

Friends?

Instinct?

Experience?

Prayer?

Nothing?

There are no wrong answers.

———

A Question For Them

"I would like to pivot into something I've been wanting to ask.

I honestly don't know the answer.

And I am hoping for you to truly

Deliver"

The ?

"I've noticed these conversations have become more **spiritual** over the last several weeks.

That's because...
that's where **my own life** has been taking me.

But **I** also **never want** Stone's Table t**o become** something that only reflects **me**.

Stone's Table belongs to all of **us**."

"So I want to know…

How's the balance?

Do these conversations feel meaningful?

Too spiritual?

Not spiritual enough?

Are there topics you've wanted to discuss that we haven't?"

I'm going to S**top**.

I **Don't** want to **Defend**.

Nor Explain.

I **Just** want to **Listen**.

I want to **Learn Something** tonight.

———

Closing Scripture

Hebrews 10:24–25

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

not giving up meeting together…

but encouraging one another…"

———

"I don't know exactly where every road in my life is going.

I don't know what kind of RV I'll end up buying or If I even will!

I don't know where this **fellowship** will be a year from now.

I don't know how every prayer gets answered.

But I do know this...

every **Thursday** night I leave this table believing we're walking in the right direction.

Maybe that's all God asks of us.

Not to know the whole journey...

but simply to trust Him with the next step."

———

One final thought

There was one sentence from last night that stayed with me more than anything else.

"He does present himself on those Thursday evenings... many times over."

I want to tell you

Not as doctrine.

Not as theology.

Just as my experience.

"I don't know how to explain it... but there are moments during these dinners where I feel **Stone's influence** in this room. Not because I hear his voice, but because I see pieces of him in every one of you. The kindness. The humor. The loyalty. The willingness to show up for one another. That's why I keep doing this."

This is why **Stone's Table** exists in the first place.

Leaving you with a Song

"I want to leave you guys with a song that's been speaking to me this week.

Im not going to dissect every lyric tonight.

Just listen.

It's called

"Not in a Hurry" – Will Reagan & United Pursuit
This fits almost perfectly with what I'm trying to communicate tonight.

The entire lesson centers around this idea:

* We want to know the destination.
* God asks us to trust the next step.
* We plan our course...
* He establishes our steps.

PLAY SONG

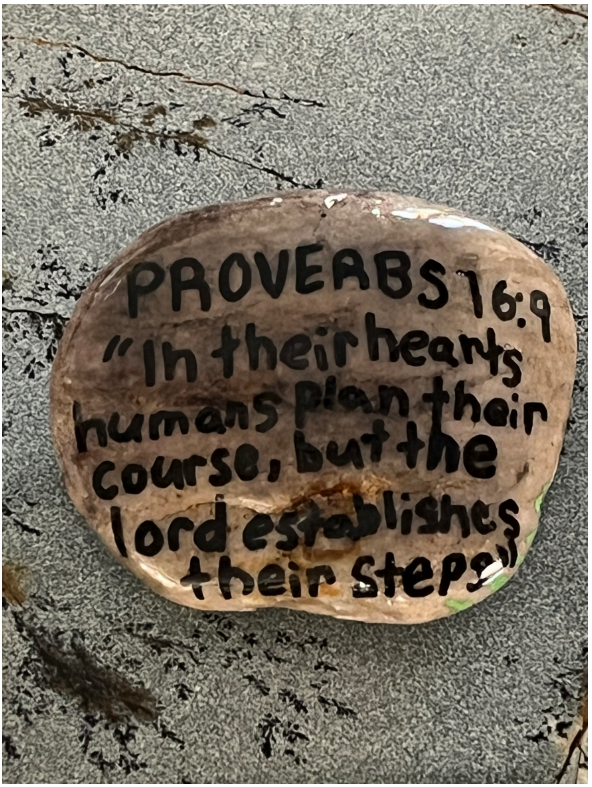
That song has the same posture. It isn't about arriving quickly; it's about **being willing** to walk with God, listen, and l**et Him lead**. That's exactly where my heart has been these past two months.

If something stands out, take it with you this week."

"Love you guys. See you next Thursday."

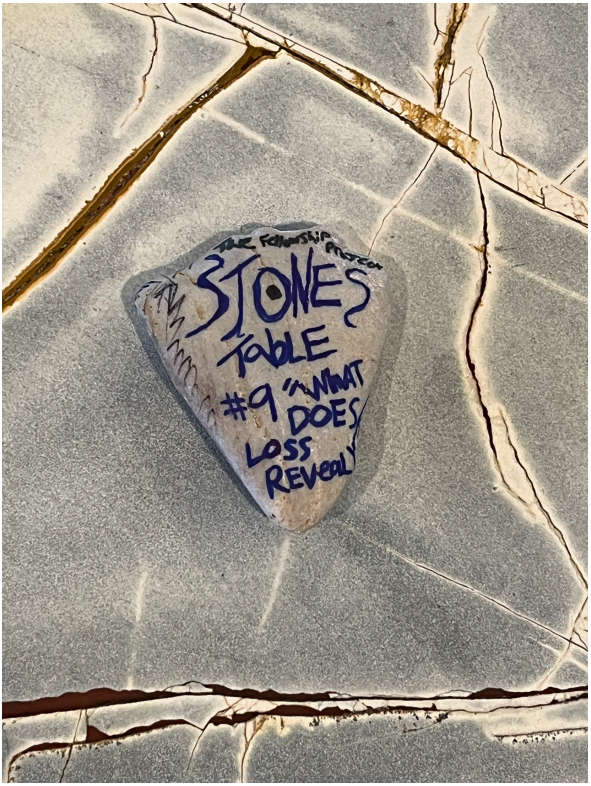
Closing Prayer...

LESSON 08


PROVERBS 16:9
"In their hearts
humans plan their
course, but the
lord establishes
their steps"

LESSON 09

What Does Loss Reveal?



THE REFLECTION

Nine gatherings into Stone's Table, I was still discovering what these Thursday evenings were becoming.

I hadn't started this fellowship with twenty-one lessons mapped out or some carefully constructed plan for what I intended to teach. Much of what I brought to the fire each week was developing alongside my own experiences, questions, and the things I was beginning to discover about myself.

And some of those discoveries were happening long after everyone else had gone home.

I had been spending my evenings reading *A Grace Disguised* by Jerry Sittser. It wasn't a book I was working through to find material for Stone's Table. I was returning to it night after night because somewhere in those pages, I was beginning to recognize things about myself.

I was learning.

Not necessarily finding answers to everything I was questioning, but discovering thoughts and perspectives I hadn't considered before. Sometimes I would come across something that made me stop reading for a while and simply think.

One of those moments eventually found its way into my preparation for our ninth gathering.

I remember thinking, **I'd like to build from this.**

By then, I was becoming increasingly aware that I didn't want Stone's Table to become a place where these young men felt they had to revisit their grief every Thursday.

There would always be room for that. Stone would always be part of our conversations.

But these boys also had lives ahead of them.

And I wanted our time together to contribute something meaningful to those lives.

I was beginning to recognize that some of the things I was discovering through my own reading and reflection might be worth sharing. Not because I had mastered them, but because **I was still learning them myself.**

I couldn't know what each young man would take away from our conversations. I could only bring something worth considering, share what I was discovering, and leave room for them to find their own understanding.

That was how I approached our ninth gathering.

And while I was finding new perspectives in the pages of a book, something else was happening right outside my door.

Our circle was growing.

Three new faces joined us that Thursday evening. They weren't strangers. They were friends from Steel's and Stone's circles who had heard about our gatherings and asked if they could come.

We gathered around the fire, just as we had been doing throughout the summer. Looking back at the photographs from that evening, I can see the chairs filled around the fire-pit, the boys gathered together, and the fellowship continuing to take shape.

One of those new faces was Brandon.

I remember him thanking me afterward for the food and for allowing him to sit in.

I asked him, **"You'll be back next week, right? We meet every Thursday."**

There was something about the look he gave me that left me wondering whether he realized this was a weekly gathering or whether he thought he'd simply been invited to a **"One-Off" get-together.**

I wasn't quite sure.

But regardless of what he understood when he arrived, he assured me he'd be back the following week.

Later that evening, I sent my sister a message about the gathering.

I told her that three new but familiar faces had joined us. Friends from both boys' circles who had heard about Stone's Table and wanted to be part of it.

All three said they would return the following week.

I remember writing how cool that feeling was.

All I could think about was Stoney and his smile.

I didn't need to imagine an entire conversation with him or wonder what he might have said.

It was simply his smile that came to mind.

And that was enough.

The lesson itself didn't unfold exactly as I had prepared it.

I had written quite a bit more than we covered that evening, particularly toward the closing. But the conversation reached a natural conclusion, and it felt right to leave it there.

Later that night, when I shared the complete written lesson with the boys, I explained that there were additional thoughts we hadn't covered and that they could find them in my Closing if they were interested.

I was learning that preparing a lesson and sharing one were not necessarily the same thing.

Sometimes the evening had its own way of deciding when enough had been said.

And the fellowship wasn't ending when everyone left on Thursday nights.

We had planned an outing for the following evening, Friday, July 31.

The group went to the tractor pulls at the Kane County Fairgrounds and afterward spent several hours together at Nash-Vegas.

I remember it simply as a nice night.

There was something enjoyable about getting together without a prepared message, without a particular subject to discuss, and without needing the evening to

become anything more than an opportunity to spend time together.

Many of these friendships had begun long before Stone's Table ever existed. These boys had grown up together, shared experiences, and built relationships of their own.

Stone's Table wasn't creating those friendships from nothing. It was adding another layer to what was already there.

And now that connection was extending beyond our Thursday evenings.

I enjoyed seeing another side of the boys, watching them interact in their own social setting rather than only around the fire-pit.

What I enjoyed just as much was how naturally they included me. I wasn't being treated simply as someone's dad or the guy who hosted Thursday nights.

They were treating me as a friend.

And I appreciated that.

I had spent much of that week with my nose in a book, discovering things about myself I hadn't considered before. By Friday night, I was enjoying the company of these young men in a way I hadn't experienced **in quite a long time.**

Two very different experiences, both giving me something to think about.

And somewhere between the pages I had been reading and the conversations we were having around the fire, I was beginning to recognize something.

Sometimes it takes losing something you never imagined living without to discover things about life you might otherwise have overlooked.

But that thought leaves me with a question I continue to wrestle with.

Am I finding something good because I lost Stone?

I'm opening more of my time, my eyes, and my heart to people and experiences. I'm recognizing qualities within myself that were always there, but perhaps hadn't been given the attention or opportunity they deserved.

TIME — What I'm choosing to give more freely.

EYES — What I'm beginning to recognize that I may have overlooked before.

HEART — What I'm allowing myself to feel, receive, and share with others.

Maybe those qualities were never missing.

Perhaps life simply hadn't given them the same room to breathe.

And now, through an experience I would give anything to undo, I'm recognizing them more clearly.

Would I have discovered these things without having gone through this tragedy?

I don't know.

But I'm beginning to understand that **there's a difference between being changed by tragedy and allowing tragedy to reveal something about yourself.**

And perhaps an even more difficult distinction to accept.

I can be grateful for what I'm discovering without ever being grateful for what it cost me.

I don't believe I need to find something good in Stone's death to recognize something good developing within my own life.

But I do wonder about the man I'm becoming.

Am I going to come through this as a better man because of the scars I wear?

Perhaps the answer isn't about becoming someone different.

Perhaps it's about finally giving more of myself to the man I've always had the capacity to be.

And that brings me back to the question I placed before the boys at our ninth gathering.

What Does Loss Reveal?

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE - The Fellowship Project

Thursday, July 30th, 2026

Stones Table #9

"What Does Loss Reveal"

Opening

I don't really have a polished lesson tonight.

I've been reading a book someone gave me called *A Grace Disguised*. There was one page I folded over because I knew I'd want to come back to it someday. Today felt like that day."

(Read the passage from page 58)

"I've been reading a lot of books since May, but this paragraph stopped me because it isn't really talking about death.

It's talking about life.

It says that **loss gives** us an opportunity to take **inventory**."

Asking the Question

"What does 'taking inventory' mean?"

(Let them answer.)

If needed guide them toward:

looking honestly at your life

figuring out what's important

realizing what you've been chasing

deciding what needs to change

Personal Reflection

"I've been doing a lot of inventory these last couple of months.

Not because I wanted to...

Because I had to.

There are things I used to think mattered that don't seem very important anymore.

There are things I postponed because I thought I'd always have another year.

Now I don't think that way."

Read this portion again

~ Few people wish at 70 they had worked more hours at the office when they were 40. ~

The ask:

"Do you think that's true?"

"So why do we keep living that way?"

The Trap

Talk about how easy it is to become consumed by:

money

status

looking successful

being right

social media

comparing ourselves to everyone else

Those things aren't evil.

But they become dangerous when they become our identity.

Jesus' Question

Read Scripture:

"What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"
— Matthew 16:26

Then ask:

"What do you think Jesus meant?"

Let them wrestle with it.

The Inventory Questions

Slowly read the questions from the book.
Don't rush.
After each one...

"What do I believe?"

"Is there life after death?"

"Is there a God?"

"What kind of person am I?"

"Do I really care about other people?"

"How have I used my time?"

"My money?"

"My talents?"

"Where am I headed?"

Don't answer them.
Just let them sit.
Silence is okay. Read them again if needed

My Reflection

"I don't think these are questions we're supposed to answer **once**.

I think they're questions we're supposed to **keep** asking **throughout life**.

Because if we're honest...

our answers change."

Another Thought

The last sentence in my notes may be my favorite.

"Deep sorrow is good for the soul because it makes us more alive to the present moment."

"I've thought a lot about that.

Pain slows you down.

You notice sunsets.

You notice conversations.

You notice people.

You appreciate ordinary Tuesdays.

You stop assuming tomorrow is guaranteed."

Discussion

Go around the table.

"Which question hit you the hardest tonight?"

or

"If you had to answer only one of those questions honestly tonight...

which one would it be?"

No pressure.

No wrong answers.

Closing

"I don't think God wastes pain.

I don't think He causes every painful thing that happens.

But I do believe He can redeem it.

If sorrow causes us to love people better…

forgive sooner…

be more generous…

and appreciate today…

then something beautiful can grow from something terrible.

Not because the loss was good…

but because God is."

Closing Scripture

I think this passage pairs beautifully with the lesson:

"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

Psalm 90:12

That verse isn't about fearing death.

It's about valuing life because we know it is limited.

Closing the night

"Life's value isn't measured by its length but by how it's lived."

One thing I especially like about tonight's direction is that it doesn't ask you boys to relive your grief. Instead, it asks a deeper question:

"What kind of person am I becoming because of the things I've lived through?"

That keeps Stone's legacy alive in a quiet but powerful way, because the conversation moves beyond remembering him to letting his life continue to shape yours.

Final Notes if time allows...

The closing scripture **we could** discuss hours on. I wanted to dive deep...dissecting each word.

To do so you have understand who said it and where it came from... this is what I learned and why I liked it ~

I think this is a particularly fitting passage for Stone's Table because it doesn't tell people what to feel. It simply **asks** them to look **honestly** at **one unavoidable reality**: our days are finite (numbered). From that awareness, wisdom can grow.

Unpacking it carefully.

"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

— Psalm 90:12

The Setting

Psalm 90 is unique because **Most** of the Psalms in the Bible were written by King David—the shepherd who became king and wrote many songs and prayers.(maybe some of you may now of him from

the recent show called (The House of David - *highly suggest to watch it*)

Psalm 90 is different. It is believed to have been written by Moses, the man who led the Israelites out of Egypt.

Why does that matter?

Because Moses lived a very long life (120 years) and witnessed an extraordinary amount of loss. During the Israelites' **40 years wandering** in the wilderness, he watched an entire generation die before reaching the Promised Land. He buried **friends**, **family** members, and **fellow travelers**. **He knew** firsthand that **life** is **precious** and **temporary**.

So when Moses prays:

"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

he isn't speaking as someone with a theory about life. He's speaking as someone who had experienced both joy and deep loss.

If you think about who Moses was.

He watched an entire generation die in Friends. Family. Leaders. Children. He knew what it meant to bury people he loved. He also knew what it meant to **carry grief** while continuing to lead.

This isn't someone philosophizing from comfort.

He's writing from experience.

———

"Teach us..."

The first word is important.

It doesn't say:

We know how to number our days.

It says:

Teach us.

Apparently, this is something human beings naturally struggle with.

Most of us live as though there will always be another Monday.
Another birthday.
Another chance to say "I love you."
Another apology.
Another phone call.

The prayer begins with humility.

"God...help me see reality the way You do."

———

"...to number our days..."

This isn't asking us to calculate how many days we have left.

No one knows that.

It's asking us to recognize that every day has value because the total number is unknown but limited.

If someone handed you a jar with an unknown number of marbles and said,

"Every morning one disappears forever."

You would probably treat each one differently.

Life is similar.

Every sunrise removes one marble.

We just don't know how many remain.

———

"Numbering" vs. "Counting"

There's an interesting difference.

Counting can become mechanical.

Numbering is intentional.

To number something is to assign value.

Think about collectors.

A person with thousands of ordinary pennies hardly notices them.

A collector with ten rare coins knows every one.

Psalm 90 is inviting us to treat our days more like rare coins than loose change.

———

"...that we may gain..."

Wisdom is presented as something earned over time.

Not intelligence.

Not education.

Not success.

Wisdom grows when we begin seeing life differently.

The verse **doesn't** promise:

"Teach us to number our days so *we become happier*."

Or richer.

Or more successful.

It says wisdom.

———

"...a heart of wisdom."

I could see this to be the most overlooked phrase.

It doesn't say:

a mind of wisdom

It says:

a heart of wisdom.

Biblically, the heart is where desires, priorities, motives, and decisions come from.

So this isn't merely learning facts.

It's **becoming** the kind of person whose priorities **change**.

Wisdom changes what matters.

———

What does numbering our days actually produce?

If someone genuinely lived this verse…

What might change?

Maybe…

* They would forgive a little faster.
* Spend less energy proving themselves.
* Say "I love you" more often.
* Waste fewer hours on resentment.
* Notice ordinary moments.
* Call their parents.
* Play with their children.
* Be more generous.
* Worry less about things that won't matter in five years.

Not because life became easier…

Because life **became more precious**.

———

What **the verse does not** say

It doesn't say:

Think about death every day.

It doesn't encourage anxiety.

It doesn't encourage fear.

It doesn't tell us to squeeze every second into productivity.

It doesn't even say every day has to be extraordinary.

It simply asks us not to live unconsciously.

———

Why this creates wisdom

Imagine two people.

One believes life stretches endlessly ahead.

The other understands tomorrow is never guaranteed.

Who is more likely to reconcile after an argument?

Who is more likely to sit on the porch with a friend instead of answering another email?

Who is more likely to notice a sunset?

Wisdom often comes from perspective, not information.

———

This seems backwards at first

The more comfortable we become with the reality that life is temporary…

…the more deeply we appreciate the present.

People sometimes assume awareness of mortality makes life darker.

Psalm 90 suggests the opposite.

Recognizing life's limits can illuminate it.

———

A question Moses quietly leaves us with

He never says,

"How many days do you have left?"

Instead, he seems to ask,

"If today's number mattered, how would you spend it?"

Not in panic.

Not in guilt.

Simply with intention.

———

For Stone's Table, One thing I appreciate about this verse is that it invites reflection rather than forcing conclusions.

I don't have to tell you boys what the "right" answer is.

You can simply chew on it and your own thoughts will cause your heart to answer.

I'll leave you with a few questions like:

* When you hear "number our days," what does that mean to you?
* What do you think a "heart of wisdom" looks like in an ordinary person?
* If you truly believed today was valuable because it can't be repeated, would anything about how you spent it change?
* Is there a difference between being busy and using your days wisely?
* When you look back years from now, what kinds of moments do you hope you'll be glad you didn't miss?

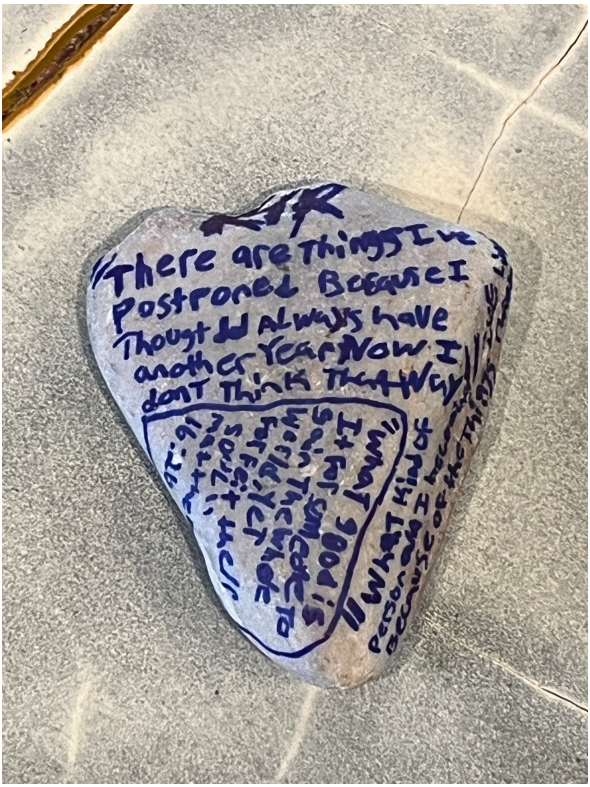
These questions don't really steer you toward a particular answer. They invite you to examine your own priorities—the very kind of reflection Psalm 90 seems designed to awaken.

"SO take **inventory** of your mind maybe

But listen to how your HEART answers

I believe by doing that, that will cause you mind to possibly rethink your or reinforce your D**irection** as we spoke about last week"

LESSON 09


There are things I've
Postponed Because I
Thought I'd Always have
another Year Now I
don't Think That Way

LESSON 10

Let Go Again

FRONT OF STONE

Photograph placeholder

THE REFLECTION

Sometimes you don't realize how deeply your words are reaching someone until they find their own way of speaking back.

The Thursday before this gathering, Brandon joined us around the fire for his first evening at Stone's Table. Although he was familiar with the boys, this particular setting was new to him. He spent much of that evening listening, observing, and taking in the conversations unfolding around the fire.

What I didn't know then was just how much he was carrying away from those conversations.

The following Monday, only a few days after sitting with us, Brandon reached out and shared a piece of writing with me. It spoke about something I was becoming painfully familiar with.

Letting go.

Not once. Not twice. But again and again.

Brandon had found something in those words that connected with his own experiences. And somewhere in his reflection, he recognized a connection to what I was living through after losing Stone.

He asked if I would be willing to share it with the boys.

I was moved.

Not simply because of what he sent, but because he trusted me enough to share something meaningful to him and allow me to give it a voice around the fire.

I felt honored.

And I knew immediately that Thursday's lesson would be built around his contribution.

There was something happening at Stone's Table that I was beginning to recognize.

When I started these gatherings, I hoped to offer the boys a place where they could talk openly, ask questions, challenge their thinking, and perhaps find some direction.

I never expected to have all the answers. I was still searching for plenty of my own.

But that Monday, Brandon showed me something.

These conversations weren't ending when the fire went out.

They were traveling home with these young men. Finding their way into their thoughts, their experiences, and perhaps even the things they hadn't yet found the words to express.

I knew at that moment these conversations were **cutting right to these boys' souls.**

And here was a young man who had attended Stone's Table only once, already helping shape what we would discuss the following week.

I had begun Stone's Table believing I had something worth sharing with these boys.

Now one of them was bringing something back to me.

There is a difference between gathering people around a fire and creating a place where they feel they belong.

I was learning that belonging wasn't something I could simply offer with an invitation. It was something these young men needed to experience for themselves. By allowing them to speak, to listen, to question, and even to remain silent, I was beginning to see what that looked like.

And when Brandon reached out that Monday, I realized something else.

I didn't have to be the one bringing every conversation to the Table. I needed to make certain there was room for everyone else to bring theirs.

But Brandon's passage was doing something else, too.

It was asking me to consider what it actually meant to let someone go.

I had been living with Stone's absence for nearly three months, and there wasn't a single part of me that wanted to let my boy go.

How could I?

He was my son. My Simple Soft Stone.

I didn't wake up each morning deciding whether I was going to miss him. Life had a way of making that decision for me.

A song. A motorcycle. Walking past his bedroom. Seeing Steel or Mandy.

Sometimes it took nothing more than a thought.

And there I was, missing him all over again.

But as I began working through Brandon's passage, I found myself challenging the very idea of letting go.

Maybe I wasn't supposed to let Stone go.

Maybe what I needed to let go of was the belief that he had to be physically standing beside me for our relationship to continue.

Because I didn't want a different relationship with my son. **I wanted the one we had.**

I wanted the conversations, the laughter, the ordinary moments that never seemed extraordinary until they were gone.

And yet, whether I was ready to accept it or not, my relationship with Stone had changed.

My love for him hadn't.

Recognizing that didn't make living with his absence any easier. But it gave me a new thought to carry alongside the pain.

And sometimes, recognizing a thought is more important than knowing what to do with it.

Nearly six months later, I'm still learning what that means.

Stone's absence isn't something that visits me occasionally. It's part of every experience I have. My mind doesn't work the way it did before May 9th. I think slower now, with more intention. I've become

protective of my time, my thoughts, and the things I allow into my life.

I've stepped away from much of the noise that once occupied my attention. The endless distractions, the conversations that lead nowhere, the constant pull of a world competing for a piece of my mind.

I have very little time to waste.

I'm learning to become a warrior. Learning how to put on my armor, how to wear it, and how to use it.

And I'm learning that strength doesn't mean I have to fight every moment.

Sometimes it means allowing myself grace.

When I struggle, I don't have to treat that struggle as a failure. I can recognize it for what it is, another part of learning to live with a love that hasn't diminished simply because the person I love is no longer physically beside me.

And when I can give myself that grace, I believe I'm feeling God's grace.

I think about the scars I remember seeing on older men when I was a boy. Those scars always seemed to carry a story. Sometimes I never learned what happened, but something about them made me look at those men differently. I imagined what they must have endured.

Now I carry a scar of my own.

One I never wanted. One I would give anything not to have.

But it's mine, and it's part of Stone's story and mine.

I carry Stone every day, and I wear his scar with honor.

Not because I've conquered the pain, but because I'm learning how to live with it.

And perhaps that's another reason Brandon's contribution meant so much to me.

He hadn't come to the Table with an answer to my grief. He had simply recognized something in his own experiences that might help me better understand mine.

He trusted me enough to share it.

And in doing so, he reminded me that fellowship isn't built by one person having all the answers.

It's built when people recognize that what they've experienced, what they've learned, and even what they're still struggling to understand might be worth sharing with someone else.

Sometimes the person you're hoping to help becomes the person who helps you.

That Thursday, Brandon's words helped shape our tenth gathering.

He may not have realized what his contribution meant to me. But he had given me something I could carry beyond that evening.

A different way of understanding what it means to let go, without ever having to let go of the love.

And the grace to recognize that I may have to learn it again and again.

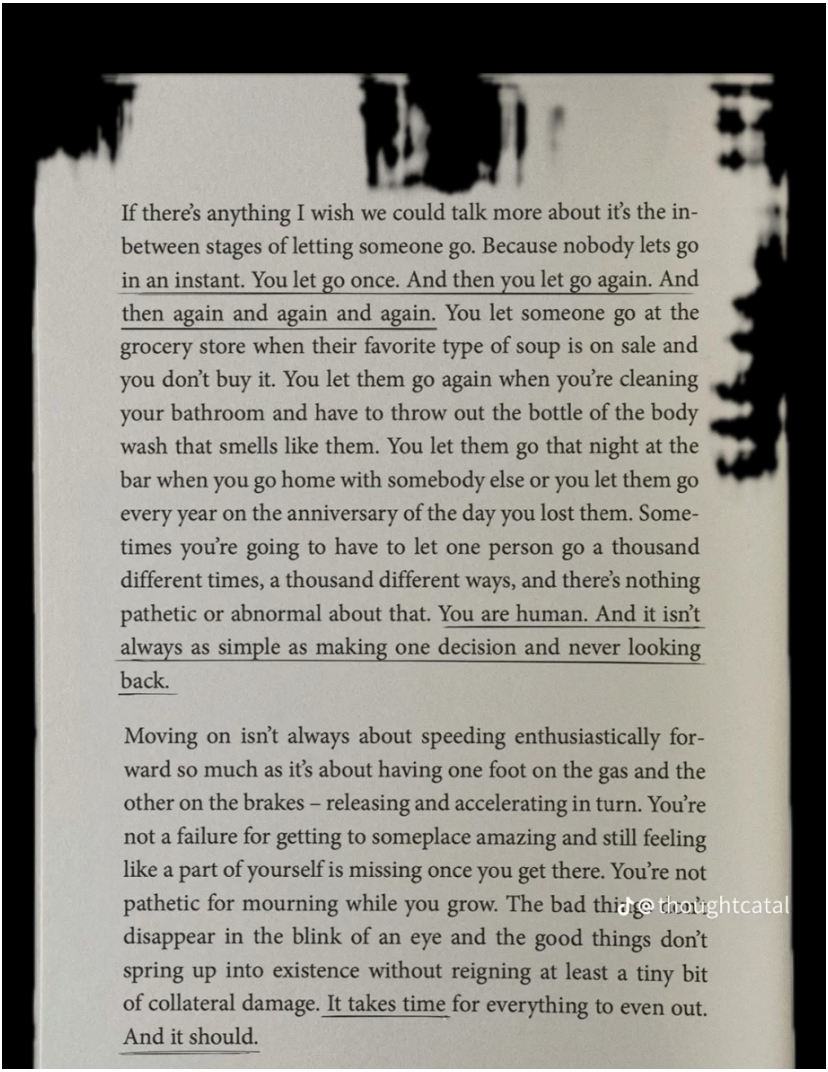
Let Go Again.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE - The Fellowship Project
Thursday, August 6, 2026
"Let Go Again"
Stone's Table #10
"You Let Go Again"

Tonight is a bit different I am going to read you a Piece Brandon Shared with me last week and asked if I would be able to read it to the group, I am not sure if he thought I would take it this **far** and make it tonights discussion but I found it to be powerful. So if you can bear with me, I am going to do just a lot of reading at first, starting with his...then I thought I might share with you my entry from last night in my memoir I am writing, I broke down my interpretation on this piece, and figure I would allow you to see my process and how I reviewed it. IF we want to continue after that I have also made some notes we can walk through and discuss from there.

(Read Brandon's passage)



If there's anything I wish we could talk more about it's the in-between stages of letting someone go. Because nobody lets go in an instant. You let go once. And then you let go again. And then again and again and again. You let someone go at the grocery store when their favorite type of soup is on sale and you don't buy it. You let them go again when you're cleaning your bathroom and have to throw out the bottle of the body wash that smells like them. You let them go that night at the bar when you go home with somebody else or you let them go every year on the anniversary of the day you lost them. Sometimes you're going to have to let one person go a thousand different times, a thousand different ways, and there's nothing pathetic or abnormal about that. You are human. And it isn't always as simple as making one decision and never looking back.

Moving on isn't always about speeding enthusiastically forward so much as it's about having one foot on the gas and the other on the brakes – releasing and accelerating in turn. You're not a failure for getting to someplace amazing and still feeling like a part of yourself is missing once you get there. You're not pathetic for mourning while you grow. The bad things don't disappear in the blink of an eye and the good things don't spring up into existence without reigning at least a tiny bit of collateral damage. It takes time for everything to even out. And it should.

@thoughtcatal

(Read LTTF Entry from August 7th, 2026)

STONE'S TABLE #10

"You Let Go Again"

Letters to the Future - The Ted Journals

Grief & Letting Go

My Entry

Tomorrow night marks another Stone's Table...so you know what that means...I am preparing for Stones Table. I am going to open up with reading this piece Brandon shared with me

Brandon sent me a passage this week and asked if I would read it to the group. After reading it several times, I realized he probably has no idea how much those words spoke to me personally.

The author writes that letting someone go doesn't happen once. It happens over and over again. At first I thought those words were about breakups or relationships, but the more I sat with them, the more I realized this is exactly what grief feels like.

Nobody tells you that losing someone isn't a single event.

It happens when I hear one of Stone's songs.

It happens when I see a motorcycle ride by.

It happens when someone mentions his name.

It happens watching Steel.

It happens seeing Mandy.

It happens every Thursday night when these boys gather around my fire because without Stone, none of us would probably be sitting here together.

Every one of those moments quietly asks me to release something all over again.

I don't think I have ever truly "let Stone go," nor do I think I want to.

What I am learning is that I have to let go of expecting life to look the way it once did.

Those are two very different things.

I don't want tomorrow night's conversation to be about moving on.

I want it to be about moving forward.

Because moving forward doesn't require forgetting.

It simply requires trusting that God can carry what I no longer can.

Tomorrow I'll ask the boys what grief has looked like in their own lives. Maybe not through death, but through broken friendships, divorce, disappointment, lost dreams, or becoming someone different than they once were.

I hope they understand that healing isn't measured by how little you hurt.

Maybe it's measured by how faithfully you continue loving while carrying the hurt.

To Myself

I am beginning to accept that grief is not something I finish.

I don't need to become frustrated when an unexpected memory brings me to tears again. Those moments are not setbacks. They are reminders that love still exists.

I don't need to rush toward some imaginary finish line where everything finally feels normal again.

If I keep measuring myself against that expectation, I will always feel like I'm behind.

Instead, I want to measure my life by something different.

Am I still loving?

Am I still serving?

Am I still choosing gratitude alongside sorrow?

Am I still walking with God even when I don't understand?

If those answers remain yes, then perhaps I am healing exactly the way healing was intended to happen.

One day at a time.

One memory at a time.

One act of letting go...

again.

The Understander/ Witness

He is beginning to see something many people spend a lifetime resisting.

Grief is not proof that healing has failed.

Grief is proof that love remains.

The world often tells us that strength means reaching a day when the tears stop. But wisdom understands that love does not obey a calendar. It revisits familiar places, familiar songs, familiar faces, and asks the heart to respond once more.

He no longer believes that moving forward requires leaving Stone behind.

Instead, he is learning to carry Stone differently.

That is what maturity in grief looks like.

Not a lighter love...

but stronger shoulders.

Tomorrow night, these young men may believe they are gathering to hear another lesson.

Instead, they will witness something far more valuable.

A man who refuses to hide his sorrow, yet refuses to surrender his hope.

That is the kind of strength worth following.

Because Christ never asked us to forget those we love.

He asked us to trust Him enough to keep walking until the day every goodbye becomes a reunion.

***I also noticed something that ties directly into the direction I've been taking with previous Entries to LTTF .

Marcus Aurelius often wrote that we should accept what we cannot control. Scripture teaches us to trust God in what we cannot control. This passage adds another layer: accepting that grief itself isn't a single event to conquer, but a recurring act of love. That fits beautifully with what I've been telling the boys—that wisdom isn't the absence of sorrow; it's learning how to carry sorrow without letting it steal the goodness that remains.

"I've been thinking about one sentence all week."
'You let someone go again and again and again.'
"I don't think that's just true after a breakup.
I think that's exactly what grief feels like."

"Have you ever thought grief worked like this?"
"Not just when someone dies...
...but after a friendship ends...
...after your parents divorce...
...after you quit a team...
...after moving away...
...after losing a dream?"

The lesson

"Most people think healing looks like this..."
Imagine a straight line.

Loss → Grieve → Heal → Move on
"But I don't think life works that way."
Instead imagine a **Spiral**.

"We revisit the same memories...
the same places...
the same songs...
the same birthdays...
the same empty chair."
"But every time we come back...
we're just a little different than we were before."

Personal Story
"I've learned something these last three months."
"I don't wake up every morning deciding whether or not I'm going to miss Stone.
Life decides for me."
"A song.
A motorcycle.
A kid that laughs like him.
Walking past his bedroom.
Watching Steel.
Seeing Mandy.
Every one of those moments asks me to let go all over again."
"And every single time...

I have to choose what I'm going to do with that pain."

The Turning Point

If we were to challenge the wording just a little.

"I don't actually think we ever let someone go."

"They become part of us."

"I don't want to let Stone go.

I probably need to let go of believing I need him standing beside me to keep loving him."

Huge difference.

Love doesn't disappear.

The relationship changes.

Scripture

This naturally leads to **Ecclesiastes 3:1–4**

"There is a time for everything...

a time to weep,

and a time to laugh...

a time to mourn,

and a time to dance."

Notice...

God never says there is a time to stop loving.

He says there is a season for mourning.

Or, if you want something that lands even harder:

Psalm 34:18

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

God doesn't tell the brokenhearted to hurry.

He tells them He'll stay close.

Discussion Questions

What memory catches you off guard the most?

Do you think healing means forgetting?

What's something you've had to "let go of" more than once?

How can we help someone who's in one of those moments?

Is there a difference between moving on and moving forward?

Closing

"I think this article gets one thing exactly right."

'You are human.'

"We spend so much time trying to be strong...

when maybe strength is simply having the courage to feel what we're feeling."

"If you've got someone you miss...

don't apologize for it.

Missing someone isn't weakness.

It's evidence they mattered."

"And if tomorrow catches you off guard...

don't think you've failed. Maybe you're just loving someone again."

LESSON 10

BACK OF STONE

Photograph placeholder

LESSON 11

Isaiah 41 — Where Does Our Strength Come From?



THE REFLECTION

Isaiah 41 — Where Does Our Strength Come From?

This week's lesson began with something Kurtis shared with me.

He had come across a passage he believed might have been from Isaiah 41:10. When I opened my Bible to look it up, I discovered that what he had sent wasn't actually Scripture. It was someone's devotional interpretation inspired by the chapter.

That intrigued me.

I wanted to understand what Isaiah 41 was actually saying, and whether I could explain it in a way that made sense to the boys.

As I began reading, I found myself needing to understand the history behind the words. Who was Jacob? Why was he also called Israel? Who was God speaking to, and what was happening that made His promise of strength so important?

What began as a little investigation became an entire lesson.

This gathering marked something new for Stone's Table.

For the first time, we read an entire chapter of Scripture together and took the time to unpack what it meant.

And I certainly wasn't the most knowledgeable man sitting at that Table.

Micah and Scott were both there, and they understood the chapter and its history far better than I did.

Scott did a particularly good job explaining the circumstances in a way we could relate to. I remember him describing the armies, the approaching conflict, and the history surrounding the people of Israel.

He helped bring the story to life.

But there was another moment that stood out to me.

As we worked through the chapter, Micah recognized that some of the boys were getting lost in the explanation.

He naturally stepped into the conversation.

He reminded them that it was perfectly understandable not to be familiar with what we were discussing. Just as he might find himself standing in front of a car with one of them, looking at something he had never worked on or understood, they were now encountering something he had spent considerable time studying.

Not knowing something doesn't mean you don't belong in the conversation.

It simply means there's something new to learn.

I remember feeling excited watching Micah in that moment.

He had chosen a path toward becoming an Army chaplain, and I knew his future would place him among people from all different walks of life, many of whom

wouldn't have the biblical understanding he was accustomed to sharing with fellow scholars.

Here he was, sitting among a group of young men, doing something that would eventually become a regular part of his calling.

And he did it so naturally.

There was no need for me to ask him to step in. He recognized what the boys needed and offered what he knew.

I had prepared the lesson, but I wasn't the only one contributing to its understanding.

I was learning right alongside the boys.

And the more I think about what I was trying to share that evening, the more I realize that the lesson wasn't really about becoming fearless.

It was about understanding that **it's okay to be afraid.**

Stone's death had confronted these young men with something many of them had probably never imagined having to face.

Something they couldn't fix, couldn't prepare for, and couldn't necessarily understand.

For many of them, the loss was still raw and confusing. They were learning how quickly life could change, and how little control we sometimes have over what happens to the people we love.

I wanted them to understand that uncertainty about their futures, or fear of what life might bring, didn't mean they lacked courage or faith.

When I read God's words to Israel, I interpreted His reassurance almost as though He were saying:

"Look at everything you're afraid of. Now look at Me."

God wasn't dismissing their fears. He was reminding them that they weren't facing those fears alone.

And that led me to think about how we carry ourselves as men.

We develop confidence. Sometimes we've earned it through experience, and sometimes we're simply trying to convince ourselves that we know what we're doing.

I don't necessarily believe that's a bad thing.

Confidence can get us moving. It can encourage us to attempt something we've never done before.

But sometimes we find ourselves in deeper than we're equipped to handle.

And that's where I believe faith becomes something more than confidence.

God recognizes what we're capable of, even when we don't recognize it ourselves.

And when we begin doubting those abilities, I believe there's comfort in knowing our Heavenly Father has our back.

Sometimes all we need to do is look up and remember that He's there.

But there was another part of Isaiah 41 that I was wrestling with personally.

What happens when we pray for something, believe in something, and still don't receive the outcome we desperately wanted?

In the lesson, I used my construction business as an example. It was something tangible the boys could understand. I had worked hard, believed in what I was building, and prayed for its success. Yet things hadn't unfolded the way I had hoped.

It was an example of how our plans and expectations don't always align with what happens in our lives.

But underneath that example was something far more personal.

I had lost my son.

And no amount of hard work, confidence, determination, or prayer was going to bring Stone home.

I was still trying to understand how to trust God while living with an outcome I would never have chosen.

I wasn't questioning whether I loved God. I was trying to understand what His promises meant when life had taken something from me that could never be replaced.

And perhaps that was why the distinction in Isaiah 41 mattered so much to me.

God doesn't promise that everything we want will become ours. He promises that we won't have to face everything alone.

I wanted the boys to understand that faith wasn't a guarantee that every obstacle would disappear or every prayer would receive the answer we hoped for.

Sometimes faith is what remains when the answers don't come.

And sometimes the strength we need isn't the strength to change what happened.

It's the strength to keep living when we cannot change it.

I had prepared the message, but Micah and Scott helped us understand it. Their willingness to contribute reminded me that I didn't have to know everything to bring these young men together.

Sometimes leadership isn't having every answer. It's creating a place where we're willing to discover them together.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE - The Fellowship Project

STONE'S TABLE #11
Thursday, August 13, 2026
Isaiah 41 — Where Does Our Strength Come From?

OPENING

Tonight's topic actually came from Kurtis.

Kurtis sent me something this week that was labeled **Isaiah 41:10**. When I went to my Bible and looked up Isaiah 41:10 in the NIV, I realized the words he sent me weren't actually the verse.

What he sent was more of an inspirational piece. There was nothing necessarily wrong with the message, but it wasn't Scripture.

That caused me to read the actual verse—and eventually the entire chapter.

And I'm glad I did.

Because I think what the actual chapter has to say is much stronger than the inspirational message that led me there.

I'm going to read what Kurtis sent me first, then the actual Scripture, and give you guys a quick biblical history lesson so we understand what God is actually saying and why.

WHAT KURTIS SHARED

Isaiah 41:10 — possibly a devotional writing

Everything happens for a reason. You'll wait. You'll cry.

You'll feel like giving up... but you'll wait again.

You'll find hope then face disappointment. Trials will come. The weight of the waiting will feel heavy, but God will give you the strength to keep going. And in the end... one beautiful day, it will all come together. Everything you prayed for, cried for, and waited for will be worth it.

You might not see it now, but one day you'll look back and realize God was protecting you, guiding you, and preparing you for something better. Hold on to your faith. His timing is perfect.

Amen.

THE ACTUAL ISAIAH 41:10 — NIV

"So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

When you hear that verse by itself, it sounds encouraging.

But once I understood what was happening around it, those words carried a lot more weight.

QUICK BIBLICAL HISTORY — WHO ARE JACOB AND ISRAEL?

Before going any further, there is a little family history we need to understand, because this confused me when I first read Isaiah 41.

It starts with a simple family line:

Abraham → Isaac → Jacob

Abraham was chosen by God, and God made a covenant with him.

Abraham had a son named **Isaac**.

Isaac then had a son named **Jacob**.

So **Jacob was Abraham's grandson.**

Jacob was an actual man—not originally the name of a group of people.

Later in Jacob's life, God gave him a new name:

Israel.

So **Jacob and Israel were originally two names for the same man.**

Jacob—now called Israel—had **twelve sons**.

Those twelve sons and their descendants became the **twelve tribes of Israel**.

As generations passed, those descendants became the people and eventually the nation we know in the Bible as:

Israel.

So the progression is:

Abraham

↓

Isaac

↓

Jacob — renamed Israel by God

↓

Jacob's 12 sons

↓

The 12 tribes of Israel

↓

The people of Israel

Now we can jump forward hundreds of years to **Isaiah 41**.

When Isaiah uses the name **"Jacob,"** he isn't saying that the individual Jacob is still alive and God is speaking directly to him.

God is using **Jacob's name to address Jacob's descendants—the people of Israel.**

That's why Isaiah 41:8 can say:

"But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen..."

In this chapter:

"Jacob" and "Israel" are referring to the same body of people.

They're the descendants of the man Jacob whom God renamed Israel.

And these people have reasons to be afraid.

They're vulnerable. Powerful nations surround them. Their future looks uncertain, and Isaiah speaks

prophetically about conquest and exile that God's people will face.

That is who God is speaking to through Isaiah.

So when God says in Isaiah 41:10:

"So do not fear, for I am with you…"

He's not randomly telling people not to be afraid.

He's speaking to **His people who actually have reasons to be afraid.**

And He's reminding them:

I chose you.

I have not abandoned you.

What surrounds you may be more powerful than you are.

But it is not more powerful than Me.

That End the history lesson…

Once I understood **who Jacob was, why Israel was also being called Jacob, and who God was actually speaking to**, the rest of Isaiah 41 started making a whole lot more sense.

"If you would like I will read Isaiah 41 in-full from the Bible"

After the read…

GOD KIND OF STICKS HIS CHEST OUT

This was honestly my reaction reading the chapter.

God almost sounds like He's sticking His chest out.

He calls the nations forward and challenges their false gods.

Basically:

Tell Me what happened before.

Tell Me what's going to happen next.

Show Me what you can do.

Prove that you have the power you claim to have.

And they can't.

God isn't showing off because He needs reassurance.

He's reassuring **Israel**.

He's saying:

Look at everything you're afraid of.

Now look at Me.

THEN GOD CALLS THEM A WORM?

This part confused me too.

Isaiah 41:14

"Do not be afraid, you worm Jacob,
little Israel, do not fear,
for I myself will help you," declares the LORD.

At first I'm thinking:

Why would God call Jacob a worm while He's trying to build them up?

But then it started making sense.

God isn't saying:

"You're stronger than you think."

He's acknowledging:

You're small.

You're vulnerable.

There are things in front of you that are stronger than you are.

And then He gives them the answer:

"I myself will help you."

That's important.

God isn't pretending Jacob is stronger than they are.

He's telling Jacob:

Your own strength isn't the only strength available to you.

THAT MADE ME THINK ABOUT US

I think a lot of us—especially guys—develop a persona.

I've got it handled.

I'm good.

I'll figure it out.

Nothing bothers me.

Sometimes it's:

Fake it till you make it.

And honestly, I don't think that's necessarily bad.

Sometimes acting confidently helps us become confident.

You walk into something scared, carry yourself like you belong there, work at it, and eventually discover:

Maybe I actually do belong here.

That's how confidence gets built.

But confidence alone can still lack the **meat underneath it.**

The muscle.

Because eventually life puts something in front of you that you **cannot fake your way through.**

Then what?

PERSONA — CONFIDENCE — FAITH

PERSONA

"I've got this."

That's what I want everyone else to see.

CONFIDENCE

"I've done difficult things before. I believe I can handle this."

That's something we've earned.

FAITH

"I've done everything I know how to do. This may be bigger than me. But I believe God is still with me."

That's different.

Maybe that's the muscle underneath everything else.

NOW HERE'S MY QUESTION

This is where Isaiah 41 left me wondering something.

God says:

"I will strengthen you."

"I will help you."

"I will uphold you."

So if I'm a child of God, I've worked hard, I've done everything I can, and I've prayed about what stands in front of me:

Does God promise to help me succeed at every obstacle?

Or…

Does God help me through the obstacles that belong to the path He has for me?

Because those aren't necessarily the same thing.

Sometimes I desperately want something. *"For me it was my construction business"*

I work for it.

I pray for it.

I believe it's right.

And the door still closes.

So what happened?

Did God not help me?

Did Isaiah 41:10 fail?

Or could it be that **what I hoped for wasn't necessarily what God had in store for me?**

And maybe God's promise was never:

"I'll make everything you attempt successful."

Maybe the promise is:

"Whatever happens, I will not abandon you."

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

How much of the confidence you show everybody else is real confidence—and how much is a persona?

When something becomes bigger than you, is asking God—or another person—for help weakness?

If you pray for something and don't get it, does that mean God didn't answer you?

How do we know whether something we desperately want is also something God wants for us?

Could a closed door sometimes be guidance rather than failure?

And here's the one I really want you guys to think about:

Can you trust God even when trusting Him doesn't result in getting what you wanted?

[STOP HERE. LET THEM TALK.]

There doesn't have to be a perfect answer.

ONE LAST THOUGHT

This is where I think we have to be careful with the inspirational piece Kurtis originally shared.

It says eventually everything will come together and we'll look back and realize God was preparing us for something better.

Maybe sometimes that's exactly what happens.

But I don't think Isaiah 41 promises us that everything painful will eventually be replaced by something **better in the way we define better.**

Some things aren't replaced.

Some prayers don't receive the answer we wanted.

Some things may never completely make sense to us.

What God actually says is:

"I am with you."

And maybe that's a bigger promise.

THE PART I WANT YOU TO REMEMBER

There are going to be things in your lives that you're capable of handling yourselves.

Handle them.

Work hard.

Develop skills.

Become confident.

Take responsibility.

Don't sit around waiting for God to do something you're perfectly capable of doing yourself.

But eventually you're going to encounter something where you've done everything you can do.

And when you reach that point, faith gives you something confidence alone cannot:

"I don't have this.

But God has me."

CLOSING — ISAIAH 41:10

Listen to it one more time knowing what we now know about the people God originally said it to:

"So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

God doesn't promise that we'll understand everything.

He doesn't promise that we'll get everything we ask for.

He doesn't promise that nothing will hurt.

He promises:

I am with you.

I will strengthen you.

I will help you.

I will uphold you.

Maybe real strength isn't convincing yourself you're powerful enough to overcome everything.

Maybe real strength is knowing **what you're capable of doing yourself, having the courage to do it—and knowing where to turn when you've reached the end of your own strength.**

LESSON 11



LESSON 12

The Rut, The Lie & The New Trench

FRONT OF STONE

Photograph placeholder

THE REFLECTION

In the months following Stone's passing, I found myself spending more time reading, searching for understanding, and trying to enrich my mind with something other than the thoughts that had been consuming it.

A dear friend of Angela's, whom I consider a friend of mine as well, had been giving me books. Her name is Becky, and over those first few months, she shared several with me. One of them was *Winning the War in Your Mind* by Craig Groeschel.

I had never read anything quite like it.

Craig introduced an analogy about the ruts we create in our thinking. The more often we travel down the same path, the deeper that rut becomes, until eventually we find ourselves following it without even realizing we're doing so.

It was such a simple way of explaining something that could be so difficult to recognize.

And I recognized it immediately.

Not because I was looking at the boys and wondering what was wrong with their thinking, but because I could see those same patterns in myself.

Some of them had been there for years.

Craig wasn't simply explaining why we get stuck. He was offering practical tools for changing the way we think, challenging what we believe, and creating new pathways in our minds.

These were tools I had never been introduced to before.

I was learning them, practicing them, and beginning to recognize just how much of my own life had been spent traveling down familiar ruts.

And knowing what a twenty-year-old mind is still learning to navigate, I thought, **why wouldn't I share these tools with the boys?**

If I could recognize these patterns after nearly fifty years of living, perhaps they could begin recognizing some of their own before spending decades following them.

But there was one particular rut in my life that had become impossible to ignore.

My kitchen.

I had built the cabinetry more than a year earlier, and the kitchen had been sitting unfinished ever since.

The countertops still needed to be templated. Appliances needed to be installed. There were several things standing between where the kitchen was and where I wanted it to be.

And one of those things was a cabinet that needed some attention.

The actual work wasn't particularly complicated. I've spent my life building things. I knew what needed to be done and how to do it.

But after moving out of my shop, my tools had become scattered between storage containers, trailers, and the garage.

Something as simple as retrieving a planer could turn into a process of figuring out where everything was, gathering what I needed, preparing the workspace, and finally getting around to doing the work.

I would stand in that kitchen, looking around, mentally mapping out every step.

And then I'd walk away.

I'd done that for years.

It bothered me. It still bothers me when I think about how much time I allowed to pass.

But what bothers me most isn't the unfinished cabinetry.

It's what that unfinished kitchen represents to me now.

I remember a conversation with Stone.

It was most likely a Thursday, one of those ordinary afternoons when he'd come home from school and the two of us would gather in the kitchen to sit down and eat lunch.

I was standing there, probably looking a little lost, studying the kitchen and mentally working through everything that still needed to be done.

Stone caught me in the middle of it.

I started explaining what I was thinking about, outlining the work and everything I needed to get moving.

And he offered to help.

He told me that if I gave him a couple of days' notice, he'd be happy to help get things moving so we could finally get the kitchen off my list.

I remember how sincere he was.

I could see it in his eyes.

And I knew he wasn't offering because he was anxious to have a finished kitchen for himself.

He wanted me to have some peace.

He could see how much that unfinished project weighed on me, and he was willing to give me his time to help lift some of that weight.

That's the part I carry with me.

Because we never got around to doing it together.

The kitchen was still unfinished when Stone died.

And I regret that more than I can adequately explain.

Not only because Stone never got to enjoy it completed, but because Angela never got to experience that finished kitchen with both of her boys.

She had been patient for so many years.

She deserved to have that kitchen finished. She deserved to enjoy the home we had been building together.

And after losing Stone, I wanted more than ever to give her something that might bring a little happiness and peace into her life.

Finishing the kitchen was something I could still do.

Stone's offer stayed with me, too.

I couldn't go back and accept his help. I couldn't give him those couple of days' notice.

But I could finally begin moving forward.

And I did.

The night of Stone's celebration, our kitchen had never looked nicer. It was still unfinished, with temporary wooden countertops we'd put in place so we would have somewhere to set everything.

But it served our family and the people who came to remember our boy.

Since then, the kitchen has continued coming together.

And something happened along the way that I never could have imagined when I first started building it.

That kitchen has become part of Stone's Table.

Every Thursday, I find myself preparing meals for the young men who gather in our home.

I've discovered a genuine enjoyment in cooking for them, planning the meals, preparing the food, and watching everyone come together around the Table.

There's a certain peace I find in that.

But it's during the quieter hours that I feel Stone's absence most.

Sometimes, during the day, when Angela and Steel are away at work, I'll sit down in the kitchen to have lunch.

And I'll look across the table.

That's where my lunch buddy used to sit.

Those ordinary afternoons when Stone would come home from school, when we'd sit together and eat, talk, or simply share a little time in the middle of our day.

I look around at what the kitchen has become.

And sometimes I still point out the shit that bothers me about it.

To Stone.

I suppose some things never change.

I'm still his dad, looking at something I've built, finding something that isn't quite right, and wanting to tell my boy about it.

Only now, I don't get to hear what he has to say back.

There are moments when I enjoy that kitchen immensely.

And there are moments when I would give anything to have him sitting across from me again.

Both are true.

And perhaps that's why this lesson about ruts became so personal to me.

I had spent years knowing what needed to be done without finding a way to move forward.

Then I began learning that changing a pattern doesn't always require accomplishing everything at once.

Sometimes it begins by recognizing the rut.

Understanding what's keeping you there.

And taking one small step in another direction.

But I was also learning something that no book could have fully prepared me for.

Sometimes the reason we finally find the strength to move isn't because the work has become easier.

It's because the reason for doing it has become greater.

I didn't bring this lesson to the boys because I had mastered any of it.

I brought it because I was learning.

And because I knew how many years of my own life had passed before someone introduced me to tools that might help me think differently.

I wanted those young men to have an opportunity to recognize their own patterns, question the things they had come to believe about themselves, and understand that they weren't necessarily destined to keep traveling the same roads.

The ruts we create can become deep.

Some take years to recognize.

Some take even longer to climb out of.

And some leave us carrying regrets we may never completely put down.

But perhaps we can still learn to turn the wheel.

And begin digging a different trench.

— I hope everyone has a Becky in there life, where you find yourself receiving wonderful gifts that offer help providing some understanding and peace your soul might need, that is what she has done for me

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

Stone's Table - The Fellowship Project
Stone's Table #12
The Rut, The Lie & The New Trench
Thursday, August 20, 2026

OPENING THOUGHT — WHAT IS A RUT?

Tonight I want to talk about **ruts**.

We all know what a rut looks like.

Think about an old dirt road. Cars keep driving over the exact same place, over and over again. Eventually the tires dig grooves into the ground.

After those grooves become deep enough, you almost don't have to steer anymore.

The rut steers you.

I've been reading *Winning the War in Your Mind* by Craig Groeschel, and he uses an analogy that I've really connected with.

If we've created a rut in our thinking, one way of changing our course is to **dig another trench**.

Create a new pathway.

And eventually make that pathway deeper than the old one.

But there's a problem.

Before you can create a new trench, **you have to recognize the rut you're already in.**

THE RUT

I think all of us probably have ruts.

Some are habits.

Some are behaviors.

But some of the deepest ones are simply **thoughts we've repeated so many times that we've started believing them.**

Maybe:

I'm not good enough.

I'm never going to get anywhere.

I'm a screw-up.

Nobody really cares.

I'm alone.

I'm not smart enough.

I'm too far behind.

I've already screwed up too much.

This is just who I am.

Sometimes somebody else planted that thought.

Sometimes we planted it ourselves.

Sometimes something happened to us and we created the thought trying to explain what happened.

But after driving over that same thought enough times, eventually it becomes a rut.

And here's the dangerous part:

Something doesn't become true simply because you've thought it a thousand times.

RECOGNIZE THE LIE

Before we can change the rut, we have to recognize the lie.

That's harder than it sounds because sometimes we've believed something for so long that we don't even recognize it as a lie anymore.

It just feels like reality.

The Bible gives us an interesting instruction about our thoughts.

2 Corinthians 10:5 — NIV

"We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

Notice what Paul doesn't say.

He doesn't say you're never going to have a bad thought.

He doesn't say Christians don't have negative thoughts.

He doesn't say you're weak because something ugly, irrational, fearful or discouraging entered your head.

He says:

Take it captive.

In other words:

The thought arrived.

Now what are you going to do with it?

You don't have to let every thought that enters your head take the steering wheel.

WHAT DOES GOD SAY ABOUT IT?

This is something I'm learning myself.

And I want to make something clear:

I'm no veteran at this.

I haven't mastered using Scripture this way.

Honestly, it feels like I just went to the store, bought the tool, brought it home and put it on the shelf.

Now I'm learning how to use it.

But here's one practical way.

When you recognize one of your lies, **go find out what Scripture actually says about it.**

YouVersion makes this incredibly easy.

Search the subject.

Fear.

Worth.

Anger.

Loneliness.

Temptation.

Anxiety.

Purpose.

Failure.

Forgiveness.

Whatever your rut happens to be.

Don't just grab the first verse and move on.

Find four or five Scriptures.

Read them.

Digest them.

Dissect them.

Ask questions about them.

Debate what they actually mean.

Understand the context.

And eventually learn to believe them because, if we believe Scripture is God's Word, then **God's truth has greater authority than the lie we've been repeating to ourselves.**

Then memorize one.

So when the old thought comes back:

Recognize it.

Capture it.

Answer it.

Romans 12:2 — NIV

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

That word **pattern** matters.

A pattern is something repeated.

A rut is something repeated.

So changing our lives sometimes begins with changing the patterns happening inside our minds.

BUT HERE'S WHERE I GET STUCK

This is where tonight's lesson becomes a question for me too Because I understand all of that.

I know I should pray.

I know I should read Scripture.

I know I should do a devotional.

I know I should think positively.

I know I should think about other people.

I know I should work on becoming better.

I can wake up every day and work out.

I can sit there afterward and think about ten things I should accomplish.

And yet sometimes I still can't make myself **move.**

So here's my question:

What happens when you know what you should do, but still can't seem to make yourself do it?

MY PLANER

Here's how ridiculous this can get.

There's some cabinet work I need to finish in my kitchen.

I know exactly how to do it.

I've built things my entire life.

I have the tools.

There's a planer downstairs in my garage.

All I have to do is walk downstairs, find the planer, bring it upstairs and plane a few pieces of cabinet.

That's it.

And somehow that can feel like an enormous task.

Meanwhile, I can get up and work out every day.

So what is happening?

Why can we have the knowledge?

The ability?

The tools?

The intention?

And still not act?

TABLE QUESTION

Why do you think something so small can sometimes feel so difficult when you know perfectly well you're capable of doing it?

Added after the night ended too capture the thoughts and contribution:

Tommy offered an answer that I had never considered before once we got talking about **Procrastination**... he said,

"The thought of the task often becomes more stressful then the actual task itself, that then is when you find yourself doing it"—

Joe – this might also be a good place for you to talk about the physical /science side of this.

Dopamine.

Reward.

Novelty.

Motivation.

Habits.

Why something new can make us feel incredibly alive for a while and then eventually lose its power.

A new relationship.

A new hobby.

A new toy.

A substance.

A new friend.

Even a renewed excitement about Christ.

Why can something feel incredibly powerful at first and then, weeks or months later, we're back in the same place?

KNOWING ISN'T DOING

Scripture actually addresses this gap.

James 1:22 — NIV

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."

That's uncomfortable because it means **knowing isn't enough.**

Thinking isn't enough.

Planning isn't enough.

Talking isn't enough.

Eventually there has to be movement.

And Paul describes a struggle that sounds surprisingly familiar:

Romans 7:18 — NIV

"For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out."

There's something deeply human about that sentence.

I have the desire.

I know what I want.

I know what is good.

And yet sometimes I still don't do it.

MAYBE WE HAVE MOTIVATION BACKWARDS

Maybe one of the mistakes we make is waiting to **feel motivated before we act.**

We tell ourselves:

When I feel better, I'll start.

When I'm motivated, I'll go.

When I have more energy, I'll do it.

Monday I'll start.

Tomorrow I'll deal with it.

But what if sometimes motivation doesn't create action?

What if sometimes:

ACTION CREATES MOTIVATION?

Think about working out.

You don't have to feel like completing an entire workout.

You just have to put your shoes on.

Then start.

The motivation might come afterward.

DON'T FINISH THE JOB

This may be the most practical thing I take away from tonight.

Maybe I don't need to tell myself:

Finish the cabinet.

That's too big.

Instead:

Go downstairs.

Then:

Find the planer.

Then:

Bring the planer upstairs.

That's it.

Maybe tomorrow I use it.

But I've moved.

I've interrupted the rut.

I've turned the wheel.

Even if only a little.

GOD'S PART AND OUR PART

Christianity can't simply become:

Try harder.

Because if that's the entire message, we don't really need Christ.

Scripture gives us something more interesting.

Philippians 2:13 — NIV

"For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."

God works **in us**.

But we're still called to **act**.

Maybe sometimes our prayer shouldn't be:

God, make me want to do this.

Maybe it's:

God, I don't feel like doing this. Help me take the first step anyway.

THE NEW TRENCH

So maybe this is how we start climbing out.

THE RUT

Recognize the thought or behavior that keeps pulling you back into the same path.

THE LIE

Ask yourself:

What am I believing that might not actually be true?

GOD'S TRUTH

Find out what Scripture actually says.

Read it.

Understand it.

Believe it.

Memorize it.

Use it when the old thought returns.

THE FIRST STEP

Don't try to fix your entire life tomorrow.

Take **one small action.**

THE NEW TRENCH

Then do it again.

And again.

And again.

Eventually we're not merely trying to escape the old rut.

We're digging a new trench.

SOMETHING ELSE WE NEED TO REMEMBER

There's one more distinction I don't want us to miss.

Not every lack of energy means you're lazy.

Not every lack of motivation means you're undisciplined.

And not every period when you aren't moving means your faith is weak.

Sometimes human beings are simply depleted.

Scripture even shows us this.

In **1 Kings 19**, Elijah reaches a point of complete exhaustion.

And what's interesting is that God doesn't immediately give him a speech about trying harder.

Elijah rests.

He sleeps.

He eats.

He is cared for.

And then eventually God sends him forward again.

There is a difference between:

resting because you need restoration

and

living permanently inside the rut.

Learning the difference might be part of growing up.

TABLE QUESTION

Think about your own life.

You don't have to share the answer unless you want to.

What is one lie you've heard so many times—from yourself or somebody else—that you've started treating it like truth?

And then:

What does God actually say about it?

And finally:

What is one ridiculously small thing you could actually do tomorrow that begins moving you in another direction?

Not next month.

Not when everything gets better.

Not when you finally feel motivated.

Tomorrow.

CLOSING THOUGHT

Maybe getting out of a rut isn't one enormous act of courage.

Maybe it's recognizing where the wheels are.

Recognizing the lie that's keeping them there.

Replacing that lie with truth.

And then taking one small faithful step.

And another.

And another.

Until someday you look behind you and realize:

The old rut isn't controlling the direction anymore.

You've dug a different trench.

THE THOUGHT TO LEAVE WITH

Recognize the rut.
Identify the lie.
Find God's truth.
Take the smallest faithful step you can take.
Then do it again.

Closing Prayer

Father,

Help us recognize the lies we've repeated so many times that they have begun to sound like truth.

Teach us to take our thoughts captive and measure them against Your Word.

Give us wisdom to know when we need rest and when we're simply afraid to move.

And when we don't have the motivation to change everything, give us enough strength and courage to take the next faithful step.

Help us dig new trenches—ones formed by Your truth rather than our fear, our past, or the words others have spoken over us.

And when we stumble back into an old rut, remind us that we can turn the wheel again.

Guide our thoughts, our choices and our actions so that the lives we build point toward You.

Amen.

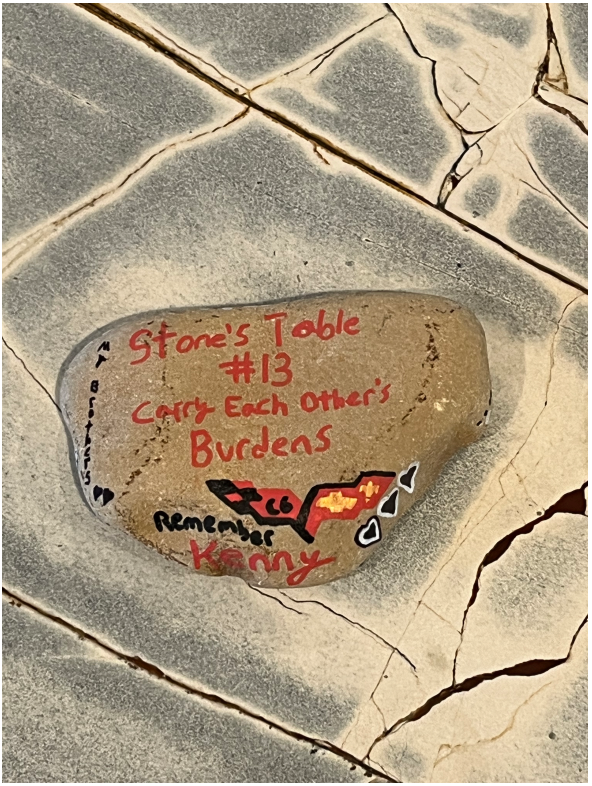
LESSON 12

BACK OF STONE

Photograph placeholder

LESSON 13

The Rut, The Lie & The New Trench — Part 2: Carry Each Other's Burdens



THE REFLECTION

Carry Each Other's Burdens

Thursday, August 27, 2026

Most of these boys have been running together for years. They've grown up alongside one another, shared experiences, made memories, and developed friendships that have become part of who they are.

When you do life with the same group of people long enough, you tend to believe you know just about everything there is to know about them.

But knowing somebody's life isn't necessarily the same as understanding what it's like to live it.

We see the picture, but rarely do we look through it.

It's easy to find ourselves looking at the greener grass on the other side of the fence. We see what somebody else has, how confidently they carry themselves, or how comfortably they seem to navigate life. What we don't see are the questions they ask themselves when nobody else is around.

And sometimes, because we cannot see those struggles, we convince ourselves we're the only ones having them.

That was something I began recognizing throughout the week following our first conversation about **The Rut, The Lie & The New Trench.**

Before leaving the Table the previous Thursday, each of the boys had written a personal burden on a stone. The stones were placed into a bowl, and everyone drew one to carry for the next seven days.

Nobody knew whose burden they were holding.

And that was intentional.

Throughout the week, I occasionally sent messages to the boys, sprinkling in questions and thoughts about the stones they were carrying. They were engaging with the exercise, responding to those messages and sometimes sending back a quick selfie with their stone.

I enjoyed seeing that.

It was encouraging to recognize that what we had discussed around the Table was finding its way into their everyday lives.

But something else began surfacing through those conversations.

Several of the boys expressed a similar thought, sometimes individually while we were preparing food or simply talking as everyone arrived.

“It's kind of nice to see that I'm not the only one feeling this way.”

Those words stayed with me.

The purpose of the exercise was never to discover whose burden was written on a particular stone. I made that clear several times. Nobody was expected to identify themselves, and nobody was supposed to

go searching for the person who had written what they were carrying.

The importance wasn't in knowing whose burden you held. It was in recognizing that somebody was carrying it.

Later, as we gathered around the fire, the conversations became more personal.

I remember Johnny sharing his experience in a way that only Johnny could.

With his unmistakable personality, he brought some laughter to the group by explaining that he had carried his stone for the week and, quite frankly, couldn't relate to the burden written on it.

He wanted to make that perfectly clear.

But what followed was something much more meaningful.

Johnny began expressing empathy for the person who had written those words. He spoke about his brothers and the importance of the relationship he shares with them. Although he couldn't personally relate to the burden, carrying it had caused him to think more deeply about someone else's experience.

And after sharing those thoughts, he read a prayer he had written.

I found that particularly moving.

Johnny didn't have to understand the burden to understand that it mattered to somebody.

THE THREE STONES I CARRIED

Throughout those seven days, I carried three stones of my own.

Insecurity. Money. Not Understanding My Emotions.

Three very different burdens, each familiar to me in its own way.

Insecurity. That was a burden I understood.

I can remember being a kid and not always understanding why the things that seemed to come so naturally to others could weigh so heavily on me. I can recognize now how some of my insecurities developed through experiences I didn't fully understand at the time.

Sometimes the very things that make us who we are become the things others choose to criticize.

And when that happens often enough, we can begin questioning ourselves rather than questioning the behavior of those around us.

It's remarkable how long we can carry something that somebody else placed upon us years ago.

Money. That was another burden I understood, although I knew better than to assume what it represented to the person who wrote it.

Money has a way of reaching into nearly every corner of our lives. It can bring security and independence, but it can also invite greed, guilt, comparison,

excitement, accomplishment, satisfaction, and even emptiness.

I've lived long enough to recognize that having money and having peace are not necessarily the same thing.

Sometimes the weight of money has very little to do with the amount we possess.

But the third stone gave me something different to consider.

Not Understanding My Emotions.

I've generally felt comfortable exploring my emotions, even when those conversations take place entirely within my own thoughts. And on the occasions when I've been able to share those feelings openly with someone I trust, I've often found the experience priceless.

Holding that stone made me appreciate something I might otherwise have taken for granted.

What comes naturally to one person may be a struggle for another.

I didn't know who had written those words, and I didn't need to.

I knew I would be offering my prayers aloud when we gathered again, and I hoped the person who had written those words would hear mine.

More than anything, I had hoped that if they heard my prayer, they would understand at least one emotion that evening—that they were loved.

SOMETHING MORE THAN THE STONES

As the evening continued, each of the boys had an opportunity to share. The conversation was vulnerable, heartfelt, and at times filled with laughter.

I couldn't help but think about how many years these young men had spent together, how much they had experienced alongside one another, and yet how easily they could still overlook what another person might be going through.

We tend to imagine that our own struggles are somehow unique to us.

We see another person's confidence and assume they don't question themselves.

We see their accomplishments and assume they aren't worried about their future.

We see them laughing among friends and rarely consider what might be troubling them when they're alone.

It's possible to know someone for years without knowing the weight they're carrying.

And perhaps that's why hearing another person acknowledge a familiar struggle can be so comforting.

It doesn't necessarily change the circumstances.

But it can change the feeling of being alone in them.

By the time we finished around the fire, I sensed something different among the boys.

I could see it in the way they listened and in the thoughtfulness of what they shared.

These young men hadn't suddenly discovered everything about one another. They hadn't solved the problems written on those stones.

But I believe they had begun seeing their friendships through a different lens.

They had spent seven days carrying something that belonged to somebody else.

And perhaps, for the first time in some of those relationships, they recognized just how much they might have in common beneath everything they thought they already knew.

Their friendships hadn't changed because they learned whose burdens they were carrying.

They had grown closer because they understood that everyone was carrying something.

I began this exercise hoping they would learn what it meant to carry another person's burden.

What I witnessed that evening was something I hadn't fully anticipated.

Sometimes carrying another person's weight allows us to recognize that we were never carrying our own alone.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE - The Fellowship Project

Stone's Table #13

The Rut, The Lie & The New Trench — Part 2: Carry Each Other's Burdens

Thursday, August 27, 2026

———

OPENING THOUGHT — THE STONES CAME BACK

Last week we talked about ruts.

How our thoughts can travel the same road over and over again until eventually the rut becomes deep enough that we almost don't have to steer anymore.

The rut starts steering us.

We talked about recognizing the lies we repeatedly tell ourselves and beginning to dig a new trench—a new pathway for our thoughts built around truth.

But before everybody left last week, I gave you an exercise.

Each of you took a stone.

I asked you to write down a burden you are carrying.

Something real.

Something weighing on you.

Then everybody placed their stone into the bowl.

Nobody put their name on it.

And before leaving, everybody reached into that bowl and took somebody else's burden home with them.

For the last seven days, somebody sitting around this table has been carrying your burden.

And you've been carrying somebody else's.

Tonight, I want to talk about those stones.

———

SCRIPTURE — GALATIANS 6:2

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."
— Galatians 6:2 NIV

That's really what we've been doing this week.

But notice something.

Scripture doesn't say:

Fix each other's burdens.

It says:

Carry each other's burdens.

You may have had absolutely no ability to fix what was written on your stone.

You didn't even know whose burden you were carrying.

All you could do was remember that somebody you know is carrying this.

You could think about him.

You could pray for him.

You could try to understand what he might be going through.

And maybe you realized:

I've carried that same thing myself.

———

THE OPEN TABLE

Tonight I want most of this conversation to come from you guys.

Nobody has to identify whose burden was whose.

If the person who wrote a burden wants to claim it tonight, he can.

But we're not trying to figure out who wrote what.

That's not the point.

The point is learning what happens when we actually carry something for somebody else.

So let's go around the table.

What burden did you carry this week?

*** Did you actually think about the stone during the week, or did you forget about it sometimes?**

*** When you remembered it, what did you think about?**

*** Did you pray for the person who wrote it?**

*** If you prayed, what did you pray for?**

*** Could you relate to the burden?**

*** Have you ever carried the same burden yourself?**

*** Did carrying somebody else's burden change the way you looked at your own?**

*** If the person who wrote the stone you're holding is sitting here tonight, what would you want him to know?**

———

SOMETIMES SOMEBODY HELPS YOU DIG

This brings us back to the rut we talked about last week.

A rut can become dangerous because it can become very private.

My problem.

My thoughts.

My failure.

My anxiety.

My anger.

My grief.

My future.

We travel that same mental road alone long enough, and our wheels naturally start falling back into the same grooves.

Last week we talked about digging a new trench.

Creating another pathway.

But here's something else I want you to think about tonight:

Sometimes somebody helps you dig.

That's fellowship.

———

ECCLESIASTES 4:9–10

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor:
If either of them falls down, one can help the other up."
— Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 NIV

There are going to be times when you're the guy who falls.

There are going to be times when you're the guy helping somebody else back up.

And sometimes you're going to be doing both at the same time.

That's part of what this table is supposed to be.

———

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

I want you to look around this table for a second.

Think about the burden written on the stone you've been carrying.

Now ask yourself this:

If you knew one of the guys sitting around this table was carrying that burden, would you look at any of these guys differently?

Because he was.

You just didn't know which one.

And that's something worth remembering long after tonight.

We rarely know everything another man carried into the room with him.

The guy sitting beside you might be fighting something you know absolutely nothing about.

So maybe we give each other a little more grace.

Maybe we ask another question before judging.

Maybe we actually listen when somebody talks.

Maybe we check on somebody when something doesn't seem right.

And maybe sometimes we simply help carry the weight.

———

CLOSING THOUGHT — YOU DON'T HAVE TO CARRY IT ALONE

There are burdens around this table that we aren't going to solve tonight.

There are things written on these stones that may take a long time to work through.

And I don't want to give you some clever Christian answer and pretend that every problem disappears because we talked about it around this table.

That's not what Scripture promises.

But Scripture does tell us something very clearly:

Carry each other's burdens.

Sometimes loving somebody isn't fixing his problem.

My Reflection on — The Three Stones I Carried for 7 days

something interesting I found reading Job and then remembered after we started this exercise was this verse involving **seven days of simply sitting with someone in his suffering**: **Job 2:11–13**.

Job has lost his children, possessions, and health. His three friends come to him. When they see how deeply he is suffering:

"Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was." — **Job 2:13, NIV**

You boys took another person's burden home for **seven days**. You couldn't necessarily fix it. You may not even know whose burden you were carrying. But for seven days you were asked to **remember it, sit with it, pray over it, and not leave that person alone in it.** From what you all shared tonight that's exactly what you did. Recognize these face around you - know that's Special and doesn't come easy.

STONE #1 — INSECURITY

What might be underneath it:

* **Not feeling good enough.**
* **Comparing yourself to other people.**
* **Worrying about what others think of you.**
* **Questioning your appearance, abilities, relationships, or future.**
* **Feeling like everyone else has things figured out.**
* **Fear of failure or rejection.**

My reflection:

Insecurity can become a rut because the more I question myself, the more I start looking for evidence that confirms the lie I already believe about myself

For example:

I'm not good enough.
I'm going to fail.
They don't really respect me.
I don't belong here.
Everyone else has this figured out except me.

Then insecurity creates the rut: once you believe **"I'm not good enough,"** your mind starts noticing everything that seems to prove it and overlooking evidence that says otherwise.

What is the lie about yourself that your insecurity keeps trying to prove is true?

That connects pretty slick back to Part 1: **identify the rut → identify the lie → start digging the new trench with truth.**

Question I'd ask you:

What am I actually insecure about—and is what I'm telling myself about it true?

———

STONE #2 — MONEY

What might be underneath it:

* **Not having enough.**
* **Debt or bills.**
* **Wanting financial independence.**
* **Comparing yourself with people who appear to have more.**

* **Pressure to succeed or provide.**
* **Fear about the future.**
* **Not knowing how to manage money.**

My reflection:

Money may be the practical problem, but sometimes what money represents is the real burden—security, independence, success, status, responsibility, comparison, or fear.

Maybe your simply broke, and don't make enough to live on your own - in short term get a job that pays DECENT and work!

Money problems can also become personal:

I'm behind.

I'm unsuccessful.

Everyone else has figured this out.

I should have more by now.

Question I'd ask you:

Is money actually the burden—or is what money represents the burden?

———

STONE #3 — NOT UNDERSTANDING MY EMOTIONS

What might be underneath it:

* **Knowing something is happening inside me but not knowing what to call it.**

*** Anger that may actually have hurt, fear, loneliness, rejection, grief, embarrassment, or helplessness underneath it.**

*** Feeling something strongly but not understanding why.**

*** Not knowing how to explain what I'm feeling to somebody else.**

*** Feeling like I should be able to understand or control it myself.**

My reflection:

Maybe the first step isn't controlling the emotion. Maybe it's recognizing and naming it.

Instead of only asking:

"Why am I so angry?"

Ask:

"What happened right before I became angry?"

"What did that make me feel?"

"What am I afraid this means?"

And maybe most importantly:

I don't have to understand my emotions before talking to somebody. Sometimes talking to somebody is how I begin to understand them.Sometimes it's simply being willing to say:

I can't take this away from you.

I may not completely understand what you're carrying.

But you don't have to carry it by yourself.

That's fellowship.

That's what we're trying to build around this table.

And maybe that's one of the ways we keep each other from falling back into the same old ruts.

Last week you carried somebody else's stone.

My hope is that sometime this week you realized:

Somebody was carrying yours too.

Man should carry his responsibilities, but God didn't design him to carry everything alone. I get this from reading these Two passages that support it well:

Galatians 6:5 – "for each one should carry their own load." *(NIV)*

Galatians 6:2 – "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." *(NIV)*

And that's actually what makes **Galatians 6:2–5** so interesting for this lesson. Paul essentially puts both ideas together: **carry your own load, but help**

carry another person's burden when it becomes too heavy.

My prayers:

For The Insecurity Stone:

I pray for whom ever imprinted this word on this stone, that they learn to conquer this doubt, lie, and emotion with confidence, excitement and resilience and to push the nervousness aside allowing the insecurities to subside. Amen

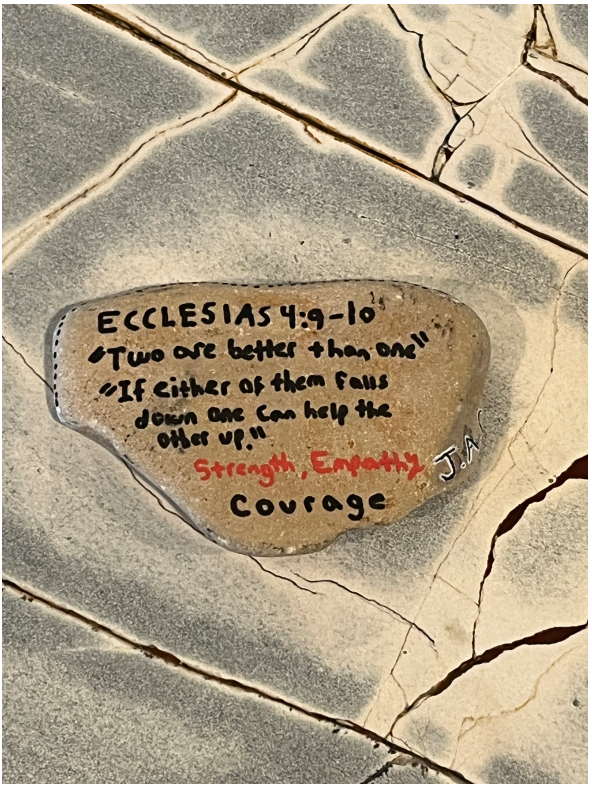
For the Money Stone:

Lord, I don't know what money represents to the person carrying this burden—fear, security, debt, responsibility, or uncertainty about the future. Give them wisdom in what they can control and peace with what they cannot. Remind them that their worth and their future are not measured by what they have. Amen.

For the Emotion Stone:

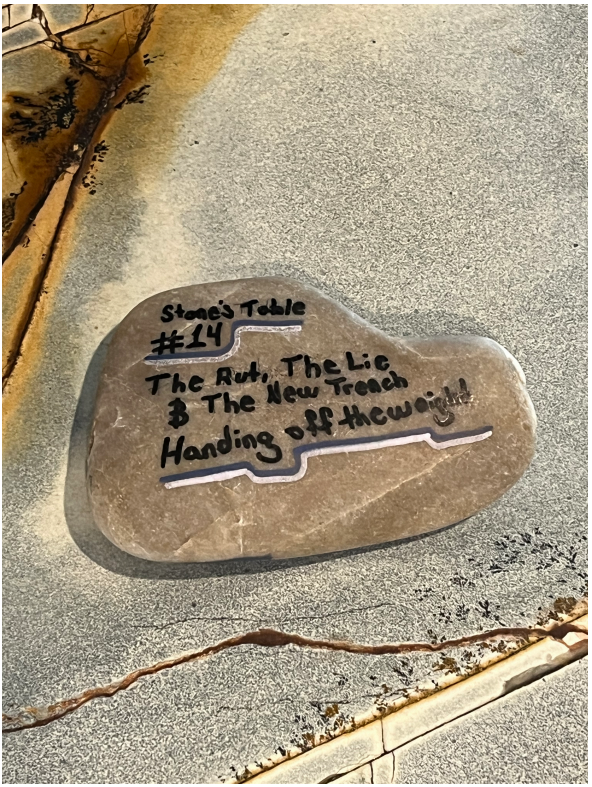
Lord, be close to the person who doesn't understand what they're feeling. Help them recognize what's happening within them and give them the courage to put words to it. Lead them to someone they can trust, and remind them they don't have to understand everything before asking for help. Amen.

LESSON 13


ECCLESIAS 4:9-10
"Two are better than one"
"If either of them falls
down one can help the
other up."
Strength, Empathy
Courage
J.A

LESSON 14

The Rut, The Lie & The New Trench — Part 3: Handing Off the Weight



THE REFLECTION

Handing Off the Weight

As I continued writing Part 2 of *The Rut, The Lie & The New Trench*, I realized there was more to explore than I could reasonably fit into one evening. Part 3 wasn't something I had originally planned. It developed naturally from the direction the previous lesson was taking.

We had spent time recognizing our burdens and learning what it meant to carry something for someone else. But there was another side of fellowship I felt was equally important.

Learning when and how to let someone carry something for us.

I wanted these young men to understand that seeking help isn't a weakness. We were never designed to carry every burden, navigate every emotion, or even experience every celebration alone.

We need people to share our struggles, but we also need people to share our victories.

And there's a difference between **being alone** and **living in isolation**.

Solitude can be healthy and intentional. Sometimes we need that time to ourselves. But isolation becomes something different when we stop allowing others into our experiences.

Fellowship isn't simply about having someone to turn to when life becomes difficult. It's about having people to experience life with.

After losing Stone, I recognized how easily isolation could creep into my own life. But what frightened me even more was the possibility of it finding its way into Steel's.

I worried tremendously about my surviving son. Angela and I had already spent many years together, and I knew we would continue navigating this life alongside one another. She was stuck with me for the long haul, and I wasn't about to stop needling her about what she was feeling.

But Steel was different.

He was a young man with an entire life still ahead of him, and I feared that losing his brother could leave him feeling so lost that he might begin withdrawing from the people who loved him.

My thoughts had already carried me into a future that hadn't even been written. I imagined him moving out someday, gradually disconnecting from me. Not out of spite, resentment, or anything wrong with our relationship, but simply because he might feel lost.

I was afraid isolation could become a place he entered without knowing how to find his way back.

And the truth was, I was struggling with some of those same feelings myself.

I remember our close friend Nora asking me how I was doing. My answer was something I've thought about many times since:

“I feel like I'm on an Island of Isolation.”

It wasn't simply that people weren't reaching out, nor was it that I was unwilling to let them in.

It was the circumstance we had been dropped into.

Losing Stone had placed us in a world we didn't recognize, one where even the people standing closest to us couldn't necessarily understand everything we were experiencing.

When people I loved reached out, some offered words that brought healing. Others, unfortunately, spoke words that were simply too raw for me to receive.

I knew their intentions came from love. These were my family and friends, people who cared deeply about me. Yet there were moments when their words caused me to distance myself from them.

And with that distance came guilt.

I knew they loved me. I just couldn't always receive what they were trying to give me.

There were things about the day we lost Stone that I couldn't bring myself to share. And there are still things today that I've shared once and have no desire to revisit.

Not every memory needs to be reopened simply because someone wants to understand it.

I was still learning how to express my own thoughts and emotions without overwhelming Angela and Steel. At the same time, I was trying to understand how to remain connected to people whose lives hadn't been turned upside down in the same way.

Neither circumstance was necessarily responsible for the other. They were intertwined.

That's how grief works.

It can leave you feeling isolated even when you're surrounded by people who love you.

And perhaps that was part of what made this third lesson so important to me.

I wasn't only trying to teach these young men how to avoid isolation.

I was trying to understand how we could keep finding our way back to one another.

In Lesson 14, I told the boys that when somebody trusts them enough to share a burden, they should listen, let the person finish, and resist immediately trying to fix everything.

I mentioned:

“Hold it before you compare it!”

My experience gives those words another layer of meaning.

When someone shares their grief, they’re not necessarily asking you to explain it, compare it, or

make it better. Sometimes they're simply trusting you to receive what they're able to give.

And perhaps there's another side to that:

Being willing to share a burden doesn't mean being obligated to share every part of it.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE - The Fellowship Project

Stone's Table #14

The Rut, The Lie & The New Trench — Part 3: Handing Off the Weight

Thursday, September 3, 2026

———

OPENING SCRIPTURE

Psalm 55:22

"Cast your burden on the LORD, and He will sustain you; He will never permit the righteous to be moved."
— Psalm 55:22

That verse doesn't say burdens won't come.

It doesn't say that because you believe in God, you'll never become overwhelmed, afraid, exhausted, or unsure of what to do.

David himself was experiencing those things when he wrote these words.

The promise isn't that we will never feel the weight.

The promise is that we don't have to carry that weight without God.

"Cast your burden" means we have to do something with what we're carrying.

Bring it to Him.

Talk to Him about it.

We don't have to keep carrying every burden as if we're carrying it alone.

To cast something on the LORD means to **release our grip on it**—to trust Him with what is too heavy for us to manage by ourselves.

And notice the promise:

He **will sustain** you.

God may not remove every burden immediately, but He **promises to provide strength, stability, and support** as we bring it to Him.

That gives us a foundation for tonight's conversation.

If we can learn to hand our burdens to God, we can also *begin* learning how to honestly let trusted people walk beside us.

———

OPENING THOUGHT — NOW WHAT?

For the last two weeks we've talked about **ruts** and **burdens**.

Part 1 was about **recognizing** the rut.

Recognizing the lie, doubt, insecurity, fear, or burden that keeps pulling our thoughts back into the same groove.

We talked about digging a new trench—finding truth in Scripture and writing a new declaration that we can use when that old thought comes back.

Last week we **physically carried** somebody else's **burden**.

Every one of us took home a stone without knowing whose burden was written on it.

And we learned something pretty simple:

You can be responsible for your own life without having to carry everything in your life alone.

Tonight I want to take that one step further.

What happens when I know something is getting too heavy—but I don't know how to hand it to somebody else?

———

WHY DON'T WE TALK?

Sometimes we know we're struggling.

We just don't know how to say it.

Maybe I'm embarrassed.

Maybe I don't understand what I'm feeling myself.

Maybe I don't want somebody looking at me differently.

Maybe I think my problem isn't serious enough.

Maybe I think:

I'm a man. I should be able to handle this myself.

Or maybe the hardest sentence is simply:

"I need help."

But asking for help doesn't mean you're refusing to carry your responsibilities.

There's a difference between being responsible and believing you have to handle absolutely everything alone.

———

ELIJAH — WHEN A STRONG MAN BECAME OVERWHELMED

There's a story in 1 Kings 18 where Elijah stands alone against 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

This isn't a weak or timid man.

He challenges the prophets of Baal to call on their god to send fire and consume their sacrifice. They cry out, dance, and cut themselves for hours, but nothing happens.

Then Elijah repairs the altar of the LORD, places the sacrifice on it, and has water poured over everything —not once, but three times, until the trench around the altar is filled with water.

Then he prays to God.

And God answers with fire.

The fire of the LORD falls, consumes the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the dust, and even the water in the trench.

This is a man who has just witnessed one of the most dramatic victories in Scripture.

But immediately afterward, in 1 Kings 19, Queen Jezebel threatens his life.

Elijah runs.

He's afraid.

He's exhausted.

He's isolated.

Eventually he sits underneath a tree and tells God:

"I have had enough, LORD."

And God's response is worth noticing.

God doesn't shame Elijah.

Elijah sleeps.

He eats.

He drinks.

He rests again.

Eventually **God asks him**:

"What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah begins talking.

One of the things Elijah believes is:

"I am the only one left."

But he isn't!

God tells him there are thousands in Israel who have remained faithful.

Even **a strong man** can become *exhausted* enough that his perspective starts changing.

Being strong doesn't make you immune to becoming overwhelmed.

———

TOOL #1 — RECOGNIZE IT AND ANSWER IT

We talked about this in Part 1.

When that familiar burden, lie, doubt, or insecurity shows up:

Recognize it.

Find Scripture that speaks truth into it.

Write a **declaration** from that truth.

And when the old thought returns, answer it.

Don't just let the rut steer you.

———

TOOL #2 — START LOOKING FOR GOD

This one may actually need to come first.

Start recognizing God's presence in your life.

And I know this might sound corny to some of you.

I'm not asking you to walk out of here tonight and suddenly call yourself a believer.

I'm asking you to **try** something.

Talk to God.

It doesn't have to be some perfectly constructed prayer.

Tomorrow morning:

"God, make me aware of Your presence today."

While you're working and your mind starts wandering—talk to Him.

While you're driving—talk to Him.

Standing in the shower after a long day thinking about what you accomplished, what you didn't accomplish, what went right and what went wrong—talk to Him.

Tell Him what's actually going through your head.

Then start paying attention…

When Elijah encountered God, there was a powerful wind, an earthquake and a fire.

But then came what Scripture describes as a **gentle whisper.**

Maybe we're sometimes looking so hard for something extraordinary that we're missing **God in the ordinary**.

———

WHEN DECOMPRESSION BECOMES ESCAPE

When burdens get heavy, we're naturally going to look for ways to turn the volume down.

Working out.

Music.

Gaming.

Working.

Driving.

Being alone.

And sometimes alcohol, drugs, gambling, anger, reckless behavior, or something else that allows us to temporarily escape what we're feeling.

Not *everything* we do to decompress is *bad*.

Sometimes you need to clear your head.

But there's a question worth asking:

Am I doing this to give myself room to breathe—or am I doing it because I don't want to feel what's underneath?

And another:

When the effect wears off, is my burden actually **lighter**—or was it **just quiet** for a while?

Because a dangerous rut can develop:

This creates a circle of events -

Burden → Anxiety → Escape → Temporary Relief → Burden Returns → Repeat

Eventually, the thing we started using to escape the burden can become another burden itself.

Professionals sometimes call that maladaptive coping.

We might just call it digging another rut.

I have a burden → I find something that gives relief → I repeatedly take that same road whenever the burden appears → eventually that road becomes its own rut.

Maybe one sign that it's time to talk to somebody is when you're spending more energy escaping what you're carrying than dealing with it.

———

HOW DO I START THE CONVERSATION?

Here's where we sometimes make this harder than it needs to be.

You don't have to understand everything you're feeling before talking about it.

You don't have to tell somebody your entire life story.

You don't even have to start with:

"I need help."

Start smaller.

"Can I talk to you about something?"

"Something's been bothering me and I don't really know how to explain it."

Or maybe:

"I'm not doing as well as everybody thinks I am."

Courage doesn't necessarily come after you become comfortable.

Sometimes courage is speaking while you're still uncomfortable.

———

IF SOMEBODY CHOOSES YOU

There's another side to this.

Someday somebody may decide you're the **person they trust** enough to talk to.

When that happens:

Listen.

Let them finish.

Ask another question.

Don't immediately try to fix everything.

And here's a big one:

DON'T BE A TOPPER.

What I mean by that is this...Somebody tells you what they're going through and you immediately say:

"You think that's bad? Let me tell you what happened to me..."

Don't do that.

There's a difference between **relating** and **topping**.

Relating says:

I've experienced something similar, so I understand some of what you might be feeling.

Topping says:

I've experienced something worse, so now let's talk about **me**.

Before telling your own story, ask yourself:

Am I sharing this because I want him to feel understood—or because I want to be understood?

When somebody hands you his burden:

Hold it before you compare it!

CLOSING — THREE WEEKS, THREE QUESTIONS

For three weeks we've been talking about the same thing from three different directions.

Part 1:
What am I carrying?

Part 2:
Am I willing to carry something for somebody else?

Part 3:
Am I willing to let somebody carry something for me?

Carry your responsibilities.

Work hard.

Build resilience.

Learn how to get back up when life knocks you down.

But don't confuse **strength** with **isolation**.

There may come a point when the strongest thing you can do is finally say:

"I don't really know how to explain what I'm carrying. I just know I don't want to carry it alone anymore."

Start with God.

And then **have** enough **courage** to **let somebody else walk beside you.**

———

CLOSING SCRIPTURE

Galatians 6:2

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord,

Thank You for bringing us together again around Stones Table.

Help us recognize the burdens, lies, doubts, and emotions that can create ruts in our lives. Give us the wisdom to know when we need to stand strong and carry our responsibilities, and the courage to recognize when something has become too heavy to carry alone.

Help us become men who listen before we judge, who don't compare another man's struggles to our own, and who are willing to carry some of the weight when someone trusts us enough to share it.

For anyone here who is struggling with something they don't know how to talk about, give them the courage to simply begin the conversation if it be with God, or a friend.

And for those of us still trying to understand You, help us become aware of Your presence in the ordinary moments of our lives. Meet us where we are, even when we don't have the right words.

Give us strength when we need strength, wisdom when we need direction, and people beside us when we need help carrying the weight.

In Jesus' name,

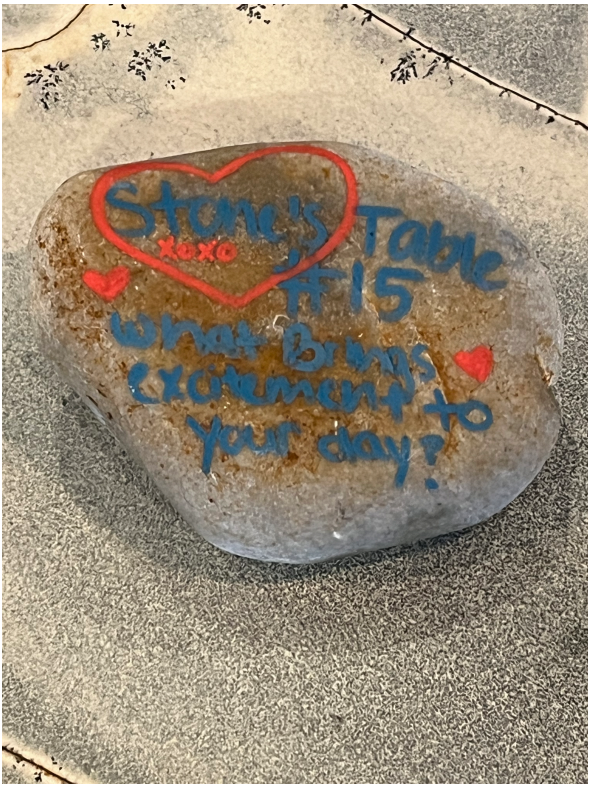
Amen.

LESSON 14


"Cast your
burden on the
LORD, and He
Will Sustain you"
-Psalm 55:22

LESSON 15

What Brings Excitement to Your Day



THE REFLECTION

What Brings Excitement to Your Day?

When I began preparing this lesson, I had just spent three weeks talking with the boys about some pretty heavy things. Grief, burdens, the weight we carry, and what it means to allow someone else to help us carry it.

I had asked a few of them what we should talk about next.

One suggested happiness.

And my first thought?

That sounds kind of corny.

I wrote those words in my original lesson. Looking back, I almost feel bad about it. But that's what I thought, and that's what I wrote.

Not everything I bring to Stone's Table arrives perfectly polished.

It wasn't that I thought his suggestion was foolish. I suppose I just didn't know how to approach happiness when I was living through something that had changed my understanding of the word itself.

How was I supposed to talk about happiness at a time like this?

It was only 4 months after losing Stone, I still couldn't tell you that I'd experienced the kind of happiness I once knew.

And today, I don't believe I ever will.

That's not to say I won't experience things that make me happy. I do. I enjoy my mornings, my workouts, conversations with others, time with Angela and Steel, and Thursday evenings around Stone's Table.

I'm functioning at work. I'm engaging in my marriage. I'm participating in life.

But I do all of it carrying grief.

Something that once came effortlessly now requires a little more of me.

I think back to when I was a kid.

Remember those great big hills of wood chips they'd dump in the schoolyard every spring? Those enormous piles waiting to be spread across the playground?

Man, those things were something!

You'd come racing across the schoolyard on your bicycle, pedaling as hard as your legs could go. You'd see that mountain of wood chips getting closer and closer, and there wasn't a thought in your head about slowing down.

Full pedal. No hesitation.

You'd launch yourself up that hill and into the air like Evel Knievel, come down, stick the landing, and keep on riding.

And what would you do?

Turn around and do it again!

Again and again.

Because it was fun. It was exciting. It was the kind of happiness a kid doesn't have to think about.

Until one day...

You don't stick the landing.

Over the handlebars you go, tumbling and wrestling with that trusted bicycle of yours until the two of you finally come to a stop.

And then comes the pain.

The frustration.

The confusion.

You're lying there trying to figure out what the hell just happened. You're checking yourself for damage, looking at your bicycle. **You're scared, and you let out the loudest scream you can muster.**

And suddenly, all you want is your mom.

Your buddies might be standing there. Maybe one helps you up. Maybe another gives you a high five for the attempt.

But something has changed.

You look back at that hill, and it doesn't look quite the same anymore.

Something has been robbed from it.

Not the wood chips. Not the height of the hill. Not even the possibility of jumping it again.

What changed was you.

Before that fall, you knew the excitement.

Now you know the consequences.

And once you know something, you can't simply decide not to know it anymore.

That's an interesting thing about being a child. Your understanding of the world can be so simplistic.

Until it isn't.

Perhaps there's a reason Jesus tells us to become like little children (Matthew 18:3–4). There's an innocence in the way a child loves and trusts, before life teaches them all the reasons they might hesitate.

Once you begin discovering that **excitement and fear can coexist.** That something you love doing can also hurt you. That the very thing you once raced toward without hesitation might now cause you to pause.

Perhaps that's part of growing up.

But there are moments in adulthood when life teaches us something so painful that we experience that same change all over again.

Only this time, the consequences are far greater than a scraped knee or a broken bicycle.

It's worth the pause.

The connection isn't simply that I've learned what pain feels like. I've known pain before.

What I had never experienced was happiness permanently altered by the absence of one of my children.

Before May 9, happiness belonged to a life where both my sons were here. I never had to consider Stone's absence in the moments we shared.

Now, even when something wonderful happens, I know that someone who should be sharing it with us is missing.

That knowledge doesn't prevent me from recognizing happiness. But it has forever changed how I experience it.

I cannot **unknow** what happened on May 9. I cannot return to a life where both of my sons are here, where I don't have to consider Stone's absence in the moments we should be sharing.

That doesn't mean the good things in my life have disappeared.

It means I now experience them with a knowledge I never wanted.

And perhaps that's why a conversation I had with Johnny Musso meant so much to me.

I had returned to the Musso family farm in Michigan for the first time in about forty years.

Johnny knew what had happened to our family. He knew what Angela, Steel, and I were carrying.

He didn't ask whether I was happy.

He didn't ask whether I'd found joy again.

He asked me, “What brings excitement to your day?”

I recognized the significance of that question immediately.

Johnny was seasoned enough to understand that happiness and joy weren't necessarily the right words to use with me. He wasn't asking me to measure my recovery or explain whether life was getting better.

He was asking what I still looked forward to.

And I had answers.

I appreciated his choice of words more than I could probably explain to him that day.

He had found a way to ask about the good things in my life without asking me to set aside the worst thing that had ever happened to it.

That question stayed with me.

And while preparing for Thursday's lesson, I found another answer in something so ordinary that I nearly missed it.

Steel had responded in our Pebble Stones group chat, telling everyone that **“Dad and I”** were going to Costco to shop for dinner.

That's all.

Two words.

Dad and I.

I had mentioned going shopping earlier, but Steel hadn't needed to privately reassure me that he wanted to go. He simply included me in his plans and told his friends.

It made me feel good.

Of course I appreciated that my son wanted to spend time with me. But after losing Stone, hearing Steel openly include me in something he was doing carried an emotional significance I might not have recognized quite the same way before.

It was a simple expression of love.

Love in action.

Steel was sitting at Stone's Table when I shared that story. I don't remember him commenting or acknowledging what I'd said.

And that's okay.

I wasn't looking for a response.

I was sharing something that had brought a little goodness into my day.

Something I might once have overlooked.

I wasn't asking the boys to understand happiness the way I now understand it.

Their lives were different from mine. Their grief was different. Some were experiencing a loss they had never imagined, while others were learning how to stand beside someone who was.

But I wanted them to recognize something I was only beginning to understand myself.

Life doesn't have to be free of sorrow for something good to be happening within it.

And sometimes recognizing that goodness requires us to pause.

Not to measure how happy we are.

Not to compare today's happiness with what we once knew.

But to recognize the people, experiences, and simple gestures that might otherwise pass us by.

Steel hadn't done anything extraordinary by telling his friends we were going shopping together.

But those two words, **"Dad and I,"** meant something to me.

His love hadn't suddenly appeared because I was grieving. It was already there.

What had changed was my awareness of it.

And perhaps that's what I wanted the boys to take from that Thursday evening.

You don't have to wait for something extraordinary to happen before you recognize that something meaningful is happening.

Sometimes the smallest moments deserve the greatest attention.

I think that's what I was beginning to understand about Johnny's question.

I don't have to manufacture happiness. I don't have to convince myself that I'm joyful. And I certainly don't have to pretend that grief has somehow loosened its hold on my life.

But I can learn to recognize what is still meaningful.

At nearly 5 months, I'm beginning to understand that I will carry this sorrow for the remainder of my earthly life, until the day I believe I'll be reunited with Stone.

I haven't mastered grief.

I don't know that grief is something a person ever masters.

But recognizing that it will remain with me has begun changing how I approach the years I still have ahead.

There is something positive in that understanding, even though I would give anything not to have learned it this way.

I have years of living still ahead of me, God willing. There are experiences I cannot anticipate, relationships to nurture, and things I have yet to understand about myself.

I don't know how grief will change through those years.

But I am learning that **accepting its presence doesn't mean surrendering my own.**

Maybe that's part of what God is teaching me through all of this.

Not that sorrow will disappear.

Not that every difficult experience contains some hidden reward.

But that His presence can remain with me through the life I still have to live.

And perhaps my responsibility is to remain present in that life, too.

Present for Angela.

Present for Steel.

Present for the boys who continue gathering around Stone's Table.

Present enough to recognize when somebody reaches out, when a conversation matters, or when two ordinary words reveal something extraordinary.

I think back to that wood-chip hill.

I can still picture the kid racing toward it, never imagining that something he loved could hurt him.

I can't give that kid back his innocence.

And I can't return to the happiness I knew before losing Stone.

But I can recognize that there are still things worth riding toward.

Perhaps now, I simply understand why it's worth the pause.

Not every pause has to be about fear or remembering what we've lost.

Sometimes it's the very thing that allows us to notice what remains.

And when I think about Johnny's question today, I realize he wasn't asking me to find my way back to the happiness I once knew.

He was asking me to recognize what still brings something good into my day.

And I can answer that.



THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE - The Fellowship Project
Stone's Table #15
What Brings Excitement to Your Day?
Thursday, September 10, 2026

OPENING THOUGHT — SOMETHING DIFFERENT

For the last three weeks, we've talked about some pretty heavy shit.

We talked about **grief**.

We talked about burdens.

We talked about the things we carry ourselves, the things other people carry, and what it means to allow somebody else to carry something for us.

Last week closed that chapter.

So afterward, I asked a few of you what you thought we should talk about next.

And one of you said something along the lines of:

"Maybe since we've been talking about all this sadness, we could talk about something more uplifting. Maybe talk about what makes us happy and how to focus on happiness."

And truthfully?

My first thought was that talking about happiness sounded kind of corny.

Because everybody around this table has been affected by what happened to Stone in one way or another.

Some of us are living inside that loss every single day.

Some were there that day.

Some lost a brother.

Some lost a son.

Some lost a best friend.

Some lost somebody they loved.

And others around this table may not have experienced the loss in exactly the same way, but you have been grieving alongside us, supporting us, and dealing with things of your own.

So maybe everybody doesn't need another week of doom and gloom.

Maybe the guy who suggested happiness was onto something.

But I don't think I want to ask:

"What makes you happy?"

I think there's a better question.

WHAT BRINGS EXCITEMENT TO YOUR DAY?

A few weeks ago, I went back to the Musso family farm in Michigan.

I hadn't been there in about 40 years.

Johnny Musso—Scott's dad—didn't ask me if I was happy.

He knew I wasn't.

He understood what Angela, Steel and I had just come through.

He didn't give me some great piece of advice.

He didn't tell me a story.

He didn't try to tell me he understood exactly how I felt.

He just asked me a question:

"What brings excitement to your day?"

That question stuck with me.

Because I actually had answers.

I enjoy my workouts.

I enjoy my mornings.

I enjoy getting closer and closer to a kitten that is learning to trust my behavior, my gestures and my tone.

I enjoy the fact that I don't need a television turned on every evening anymore just to relax.

I enjoy that I've found some solace in sitting quietly by myself in the morning.

I enjoy being able to read and not get tired of it—and actually looking forward to the next chapter.

I enjoy looking forward to Thursday night siting around Stone's Table with all of you!

Those things aren't extravagant.

But they bring something to my day.

SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO TRAIN YOUR MIND TO NOTICE IT

Finding happiness—or maybe recognizing what is good—is partly training your mind to be open enough to catch the little things.

A friend reaches out and just says:

"Hey."

Or:

"I love you."

Think about that.

Somebody stopped whatever they were doing, **thought about you**, and decided you needed to know that **you mattered to them**.

That's something.

A **smile** can do it.

Words can do it.

Music can do it.

Sometimes it's the **lyrics**.

Sometimes there aren't even words—it's just the **instruments** and something about them changes the way you feel.

Pets can do it.

Watching them play.

Watching a dog and a cat learn to get along.

Watching **birds fly in and out** of the yard.

Watching **squirrels** running around burying nuts, getting ready for winter.

There is life happening around us **constantly**.

The question is whether we're paying enough attention to notice it.

SOMETHING STEEL SAID

I was actually thinking about what I could possibly share with you guys tonight as something that made me happy.

And I really didn't have much come to mind right away.

So I went smaller.

Earlier, Steel responded in our Pebble Stones group chat and said something like:

"Dad and I are going to Costco around noon to do some shopping for tomorrow night's dinner."

That's it.

Nothing extraordinary happened.

But when I read it, it made me feel good.

Because I had mentioned it earlier, and without Steel having to tell me privately, *Yeah Dad, let's do that,* he simply told everybody that was what **we** were doing.

Dad and I.

Something that simple made me feel good.

And I almost missed it.

Maybe that's part of what we're talking about tonight.

Not manufacturing happiness...but

Recognizing it when it actually shows up.

AND THEN WHAT DO YOU DO WITH IT?

Here's where I think this gets harder.

What happens when you actually feel something good?

Do you let it in?

Do you express it?

Or do you push it back down?

Because sometimes allowing happiness to reside in you requires just as much vulnerability as allowing somebody to see your sorrow.

And I want to push this even further.

I don't think grief is always simply:

"I feel guilty for being happy."

I think sometimes there's something deeper going on.

Sometimes there can almost be something meaningful about carrying the sorrow.

You've earned that scar.

Not because you wanted it.

Not because you would ever choose it.

But because the person you lost was important enough to leave one.

And you don't want that scar taken away.

There can be something inside of you that says:

If I become completely normal again—if I become exactly who I was before this happened—then what happens to this thing I'm carrying?

Because the truth is, I'm not the same person I was before May 9.

I never will be.

Neither are some of you.

And I don't necessarily want to be.

Stone mattered enough to change me.

BUT THE SCAR DOESN'T HAVE TO BECOME THE WHOLE PERSON

Maybe the challenge isn't getting rid of sorrow.

Maybe it isn't choosing happiness instead of grief.

Maybe it's learning what we're going to **do with what happened to us.**

I can carry that scar through good deeds.

I can use it to benefit somebody else.

I can become more vulnerable with people than I would have been before.

I can say things that previously I might have kept inside.

I can let people into my innermost thoughts.

Because **someday** I'm going to be gone too.

And **whatever I never said will leave with me.**

So maybe part of living is letting people in while we still have the opportunity.

That is not leaving Stone behind.

That's carrying what Stone's life—and his death—have done to me **forward.**

MAYBE WE DON'T NEED TO CHASE HAPPINESS

Maybe happiness isn't even the right word.

Maybe we look for **MEANING.**

A meaning to get out of bed.

A reason to work out.

A reason to make dinner for fifteen guys on a Thursday night.

A reason to call somebody.

A reason to tell somebody you love them.

A reason to sit quietly.

A reason to read another chapter.

A reason to help somebody carrying something heavier than you are today.

Because **creating meaning** gives you somewhere to go.

And maybe somewhere along that road, happiness occasionally finds **you.**

WE HAVE ALMOST FORGOTTEN HOW TO BE STILL

There's another strange part to all of this.

Some of the things I'm describing sound primitive.

Sitting quietly.

Thinking.

Reading.

Watching animals.

Having a conversation.

Telling somebody you love them.

There was a time when those things came naturally.

Then technology came along and we had to teach ourselves how to use all of it.

Now technology is second nature.

And the things that were once first nature sometimes have to be taught again.

We have to teach ourselves how to sit quietly.

How to have our own thoughts.

How to listen.

How to be **present**.

How to tell somebody:

"I love you."

How hard should that really be?

PRESENCE

We can buy ourselves and the people we love wonderful gifts.

And there is nothing wrong with that.

We can take trips.

Buy things we've wanted.

Celebrate accomplishments.

But sometimes what somebody actually needs is for you to be present.

Acknowledge their words.

Acknowledge their feelings.

Recognize when their behavior is enriching—and recognize when their behavior is telling you they are in need.

Sometimes the gift is simply:

I see you.

I heard you.

I'm here.

And that brings us right back to where we ended last week.

ASKING FOR GODS PRESENCE

Last week we talked about handing off the weight.

About inviting God into what we're carrying.

Maybe tonight we can look at God's presence from another direction.

If being present with another human being can bring comfort, meaning, love, peace and sometimes even happiness…

then think about what it means to recognize the presence of God.

We don't turn toward God because He promises that every day will feel good.

Scripture certainly doesn't teach that.

We turn toward Him because we **trust His character.**

We trust that what He desires for us is ultimately good.

And sometimes His presence doesn't remove the thing hurting us.

Sometimes His presence gives us somewhere to stand **while we're carrying it.**

SCRIPTURE — PHILIPPIANS 4:8

"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable–if anything is excellent or praiseworthy–think about such things."

Paul isn't telling us to pretend the bad things don't exist.

He's directing our attention.

There is still something true.

There is still something lovely.

There is still something admirable.

There is still something worth noticing.

Maybe that's exactly what we're practicing tonight.

SCRIPTURE — PSALM 16:11

"You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence…"

Notice where the joy is found:

In His presence.

That circles right back to something we've already learned around this table.

Presence matters.

Our presence with one another matters.

And God's presence matters.

AROUND THE TABLE

So I'm not going to ask everybody:

"Are you happy?"

And I'm not even going to ask:

"What makes you happy?"

Instead, think about these:

What brings excitement to your day?

What is something small that happened this week that made you feel good—even for thirty seconds?

What is something you enjoy now that you might have completely overlooked a year ago?

Who makes you feel better simply because they're present?

When something good happens, are you able to let yourself experience it—or do you push it away?

Has something difficult in your life changed what you now consider meaningful?

What are you looking forward to?

And maybe the simplest question of the night:

What is one thing in your life right now that you're glad is there?

CLOSING THOUGHT

Maybe happiness isn't something we need to hunt down.

Maybe we need to become better at recognizing the things that are already trying to reach us.

A conversation.

A workout.

A quiet morning.

A song.

A dog.

A cat.

A friend.

A brother.

Someone saying, **"I love you."**

Someone saying, **"Dad and I are going to Costco."**

Maybe those things seem insignificant until life teaches you that they aren't.

And maybe part of carrying sorrow well isn't learning how to stop being sad.

Maybe it's learning how to remain open enough that sorrow doesn't make us blind to everything else that is still good.

We don't have to become who we were before.

Maybe we're supposed to become somebody new.

Somebody who carries the scar.

Somebody who remembers.

Somebody who loves a little more openly.

Somebody who notices.

Somebody who is present.

And somebody who can still answer the question:

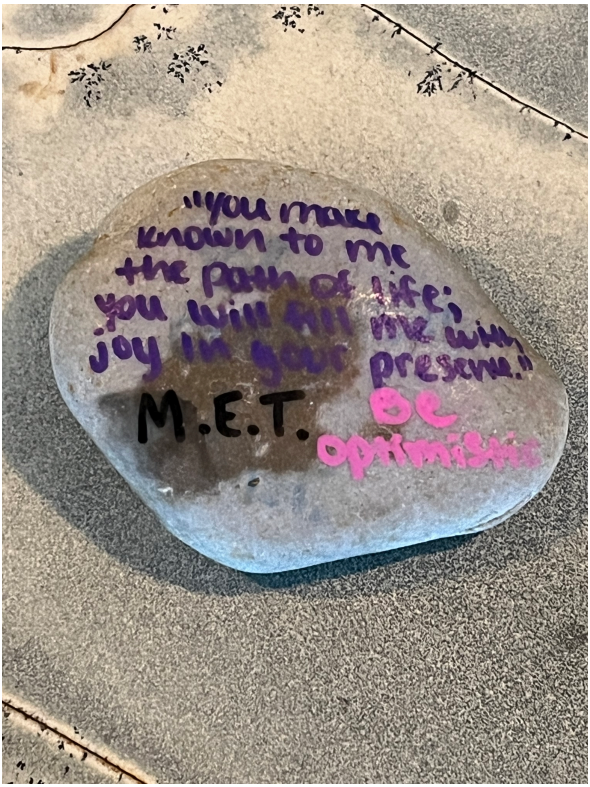
What brings excitement to my day?

CLOSEING PRAYER:

Lord Heavenly Father I ask that you will show yourself to each one of these boys that come to sit at Stones Table. You allow them to if not see but at least feel your PRESENCE when we gather as well as when they are about their regular work days. Help them recognize the joyful things that come through their days regularly, even if is as simple as a pet brushing against their leg. Let the affection one often ignores from a friend to be recognized and receive it. Allow each one of them to feel and welcome a smile from within themselves or from another. God emotions are tricky and confusing I ask you to make them simple at times for us, provide us balance we can handle.

-Amen

LESSON 15


"You make
known to me
the path of life;
you will fill me with
joy in your presence."
M.E.T.
Be
optimistic

LESSON 16

What Will Be Better Because I Was Here?

FRONT OF STONE

Photograph placeholder

BEFORE THE TABLE

September 17, 2026 | Lesson 16

The week before, our conversation had turned toward happiness, excitement, and the things that make us look forward to another day. One word from that conversation stayed with me: **meaning**.

By the following Thursday, I wanted to give the boys a different kind of question. Not a demand that they decide what to do with the rest of their lives, and not another measure of how far ahead they had gotten.

I wanted them to consider what their presence might contribute to something beyond themselves.

There was a man from my younger years whose actions had stayed with me. I had never forgotten what he offered, or the kind of character it took to offer it. His story seemed worth bringing to the Table.

I also wanted the boys to recognize that the friendships bringing them together were valuable in their own right. They did not have to become somebody else, or have their entire future figured out, to make a difference in the lives around them.

What follows is the lesson I prepared for that evening. I have left it as it was written, including the questions I asked and the stone I wanted each young man to carry away.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE - The Fellowship Project
Stone's Table #16

WHAT WILL BE BETTER BECAUSE I WAS HERE?
Meaning, Purpose & Contribution

Thursday, September 17, 2026

OPENING THOUGHT

Last week we spent some time talking about **HAPPINESS**, what brings excitement into our lives, and eventually we landed on another word:

MEANING.

I've been thinking about that word ever since.

Because happiness comes and goes.

Excitement comes and goes.

There are going to be mornings when you're excited about your life and mornings when you're simply getting up because the alarm went off and somebody expects you at work.

So maybe **HAPPINESS** isn't enough to build a life around.

That led me to another word:

PURPOSE.

And before anybody starts thinking this is going to be one of those conversations where I'm going to ask you to figure out what you're supposed to do with the rest of your life—

I'm not.

I don't think that's realistic.

I know men who are fifty years old who are still asking themselves:

"What am I doing?"

"Is there something more?"

"What is my purpose?"

I've asked those questions myself for most of my life.

I've owned businesses.

I've built things.

I've made money.

I've lost money.

I've raised my boys.

I've been a husband.

I've been a father.

I've been a friend.

I've worn a lot of different hats throughout my life, and many of those things gave me **PURPOSE FOR A TIME.**

But at this point in my life, I think I understand something about purpose differently than I did when I was your age.

Maybe **PURPOSE ISN'T ONE THING WE FIND.**

Maybe purpose changes as life changes.

And maybe we can live with purpose long before we completely understand what our life's purpose is.

PURPOSE IS DIFFERENT FROM A GOAL

There's nothing wrong with having goals.

You should have some.

You might want a better job.

More money.

A house.

A certain vehicle.

A successful business.

A family.

You might want to travel.

You might want to become really good at your trade.

Those are all legitimate things to pursue.

But I think there's an important difference between a **GOAL** and a **PURPOSE.**

A goal usually asks:

"WHAT DO I WANT TO ACCOMPLISH?"

Purpose asks something different:

"WHAT DOES MY LIFE CONTRIBUTE?"

That doesn't mean your goals have to disappear.

It means eventually life has to become about something more than continually **CLIMBING A LADDER.**

Because there's always another rung.

Somebody will always make more money.

Somebody will have the nicer house.

Somebody will have the newer truck.

Somebody will have the better job.

Somebody will appear to be further ahead.

If that's how you measure your life, you can spend your entire life climbing and never actually arrive anywhere.

WHAT WILL BE BETTER BECAUSE YOU WERE HERE?

That's the question I want us to think about tonight.

Not:

"What do I want?"

Not:

"What am I going to become?"

Not even:

"What is my purpose in life?"

Just:

"WHAT WILL BE BETTER BECAUSE I WAS HERE?"

That answer doesn't have to be enormous.

Maybe something at your workplace is better because you're dependable.

Maybe somebody's day is easier because you actually do your part.

Maybe a friendship is better because you're the person who listens.

Maybe your relationship is better because you've learned when to stop talking and start hearing what the other person is saying.

Maybe an animal has a better life because you care for it.

Maybe a piece of property looks different because you put your hands to it.

Maybe something that was broken works again because you repaired it.

Maybe somebody knows how to do something today because you took the time to teach them.

Maybe your friends make a better decision one night because you were willing to be the first person to say:

"Maybe we've had enough."

None of those things sound like some enormous **LIFE PURPOSE.**

But every one of them means something outside of you became better because **YOU PARTICIPATED IN ITS LIFE.**

I think that's worth paying attention to.

A QUESTION WORTH REMEMBERING

Before we go any further, I want to ask you a question.

You don't have to answer it out loud unless you want to.

Just think about it.

DO YOU REMEMBER KNOWING SOMEONE WHO DID SOMETHING THAT DIDN'T BENEFIT THEM AT ALL, BUT MADE SOMEBODY ELSE'S LIFE EASIER OR BETTER?

Maybe they gave their time when they didn't have much time to give.

Maybe they helped somebody without expecting recognition.

Maybe they showed up when it would have been easier to stay home.

Maybe they gave up something they wanted so somebody else could have what they needed.

Maybe they repaired something, carried something, taught something, listened to somebody, or simply stayed beside them.

And if you remember someone like that, ask yourself:

HOW DID THAT MAKE YOU FEEL?

Did it make you respect them?

Did it make you feel grateful?

Did it make you want to become more like them?

Did it make you feel less alone?

Did it change the way you saw that person?

You're welcome to share the experience if you want to.

You don't have to tell us who the person was.

You don't have to tell us every detail.

And you don't have to share anything that feels too personal.

But I think it's worth remembering those moments because they show us something important:

Sometimes the most meaningful things a person does are the things that give them nothing in return except

the knowledge that somebody else's life is a little better because they helped.

That kind of contribution may never appear on a résumé.

It may never make somebody famous.

It may never make somebody wealthy.

But it can stay with the person who received it for the rest of their life.

And sometimes it stays with the person who witnessed it, too.

HELP FROM A HUMBLE MAN

My Personal Experience

This is story time now.

I was about twenty-eight years old and a young business owner. I had opened my business account at Chase Bank with two hundred dollars in it. I felt proud of that, but when it came time to take on larger projects, I needed enough cash flow to carry the work until I got paid.

In the beginning, I was going from job to job. I rented my office from a local businessman who worked right next door. I visited with him frequently, and we developed a natural bond.

His name was Budd Wormley.

Little did I know at the time that Budd was a multimillionaire. He was a seventh-generation Oswegoian on his father's side, the Wormley's, and a seventh-generation resident of Millbrook on his

mother's side, the Budds. At one time, his family owned almost seventy-five percent of both towns. For generations, they tended the farms they owned and leased to farmers. Later in life, they sold land to developers.

One day, Budd sensed that I was struggling and asked me what was wrong.

I told him I wanted to take on a project, but I didn't have the cash flow to carry it out.

He simply asked:

"What would it take for you to get the job? Because I think you could do it, and I think you should."

The two of us looked at the numbers and came up with an amount somewhere between twenty-five and twenty-eight thousand dollars.

I remember him looking up at me—he was about five feet, one inch tall—and saying:

"Let's go over to Oswego Bank and get you a loan."

I really had no idea what he meant. At the time, I had no credit to qualify for a loan and no substantial assets.

So, embarrassingly, I had to say:

"Budd, I don't even have an account there, and I don't have any extra money to open one."

He told me not to worry.

We climbed into his 1960 green farm pickup truck with the red bed and drove over to the bank.

We walked in, and he asked to speak with a banker.

When the banker came out and asked what we wanted to do, Budd told her:

"Add this young man to my account. He's taking out a thirty-thousand-dollar loan for a business venture."

I remember the banker looking at him and asking:

"Okay. What collateral are we putting up?"

Budd looked back at her and said:

"I'm Budd Wormley, and he's good for it."

I walked out of that bank with a thirty-thousand-dollar check in my hand, and we drove over to Chase Bank so I could deposit it.

Budd told me:

"Make payments every month before the fifteenth with whatever you can afford. Just don't miss a payment. As long as you do that, there will be no interest, and there is no timeline."

Then he told me he didn't want anything in return.

He simply wanted to see me succeed.

He told me not to give up—**EVER**—and to keep working hard like I had been.

It took me about two or three years to pay him back in full after I began generating regular revenue.

We had a great relationship for years. Eventually, our mornings often began with a cup of coffee and a prayer in his little office next to mine.

Budd was the kind of person who helped because he could and because he wanted to help people he believed in.

Because of him, I was able to make something out of my business and plant my flag in town.

He didn't need to do that for me.

He didn't need the recognition.

He didn't need to make a profit.

He saw something in me that I couldn't yet fully see in myself, and he decided to invest in it.

That was his contribution.

And it changed my life.

GROWING UP WITHOUT LOSING WHO YOU ARE

Most of you guys have known each other for years.

You've messed with each other.

Teased each other.

Done stupid things together.

Stayed out too late.

Partied together.

Made each other laugh.

And created stories that you'll probably still be telling when you're fifty.

I don't think growing up means all of that has to disappear.

But eventually something changes.

Now somebody expects you at work tomorrow morning.

Someone depends on you.

Your attitude affects the people working beside you.

The decisions you make tonight can follow you into tomorrow.

And eventually there is a difference between:

HAVING FUN TOGETHER

and

DESTROYING OURSELVES TOGETHER.

There's a difference between going somewhere because we want to **BE TOGETHER** and going somewhere primarily because it gives us another opportunity to get so far gone that we aren't even capable of ending the night well.

Growing older doesn't mean becoming boring.

It means learning that the **PURPOSE OF BEING TOGETHER** can become bigger than whatever activity brought everybody together.

Maybe you go to a concert.

Maybe you take a trip.

Maybe you work on a car.

Maybe you sit around a fire.

Maybe you have a couple drinks.

You laugh.

You give each other a hard time.

But somewhere during that night, somebody talks about something real.

Somebody notices that another guy isn't himself.

Somebody gets listened to.

Somebody gets home safely.

Somebody wakes up the next morning remembering the night instead of trying to piece it back together.

The activity brought everybody together.

But the activity wasn't necessarily the **PURPOSE.**

THE FELLOWSHIP WAS.

STONE

When I think about this question, I can't help thinking about Stone.

I don't know that at twenty years old Stone could have sat down and explained his life's purpose.

I don't know that he was supposed to be able to.

But I can look around this table and see that his life had **MEANING.**

I can see evidence that he **CONTRIBUTED SOMETHING.**

Not because of how much money he made.

Not because of what he owned.

Not because he had figured out exactly where his life was going.

I know because there are people sitting around this table whose lives are different because **STONE WAS PART OF THEM.**

Friendships existed because he participated in them.

Memories exist because he helped create them.

People laughed because he laughed with them.

People felt listened to because he listened.

And some people may have even enjoyed hearing him giggle when he heard them laugh.

And even now, something continues to grow from the life that he lived.

THIS TABLE IS EVIDENCE OF THAT.

That's something I've had to think about.

Maybe we don't always recognize our purpose while we're living it.

Sometimes we see it by looking at **WHAT OUR PRESENCE PRODUCED IN SOMEBODY ELSE'S LIFE.**

PURPOSE DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN PEOPLE

And I don't want to narrow this down to simply "serving other people."

Purpose can be broader than that.

Maybe you care for animals.

Maybe you build something.

Maybe you restore something.

Maybe you create music.

Maybe you improve a piece of land.

Maybe you build trails.

Maybe you repair cars.

Maybe you create a place where people can gather.

Maybe you make something with your hands that will still be standing long after you're gone.

Maybe you provide the **INFRASTRUCTURE** that allows somebody else's purpose to **happen**.

Sometimes the person who builds the stage never stands on it.

But without him, somebody else couldn't.

That's contribution.

And I think **CONTRIBUTION IS ONE OF THE PLACES PURPOSE CAN BEGIN.**

PURPOSE IS MORE THAN JUST WHAT I WANT

There's a short piece of Scripture that fits what I've been thinking about.

Philippians 2:4

"Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

I don't think that verse is telling us that our own needs and goals don't matter.

They do.

You need to work.

You need to provide for yourself.

You need to build a life.

You need to take care of your own responsibilities.

But if life becomes only about what I want, what I need, what I can get, or how far I can get ahead, then something important is missing.

The verse gives us another way to think about purpose:

MY LIFE IS NOT ONLY ABOUT ME.

It's also about what my presence means to the people, places, and responsibilities around me.

It's about whether I make something stronger, safer, better, or more meaningful because I was part of it.

Maybe that's one of the simplest ways we can start thinking about purpose.

WHAT I DO FOR MYSELF MATTERS — BUT IT ISN'T ALL THAT MATTERS.

THE STONE

Tonight I'm going to give each of you another stone from **Stone's Garden.**

But I'm not asking you to write anything on it tonight.

Take it with you.

Put it somewhere you'll see it.

Carry it in your pocket if you want.

And sometime during this next week, I want you to think about one question:

WHAT DO I WANT TO LEAVE BETTER THAN I FOUND IT?

It could be a person.

A relationship.
Your family.
Your workplace.
Your friendships.
An animal.
Something you're building.
Something you're repairing.
Something you're creating.
Something you're responsible for.
Then I want you to write **ONE WORD OR A SHORT PHRASE** on your stone representing what you want to contribute.
Maybe:

PRESENCE.

PATIENCE.

DEPENDABILITY.

HONESTY.

LISTEN.

BUILD.

CREATE.

PROTECT.

CARE.

SHOW UP.

Don't choose something because you think it sounds impressive.

Nobody needs to be impressed.

Choose something because **IT ACTUALLY MEANS SOMETHING TO YOU.**

And don't worry about explaining it to anybody yet.

Just carry it.

CLOSING THOUGHT

You don't have to figure out the next forty years of your life this week.

I haven't.

But you can look at what's already around you.

And you can ask:

What have I been given responsibility for?

Who or what depends upon me?

What do I have the ability to improve?

What am I contributing to the people and things around me?

And maybe most importantly:

MAYBE SOMETHING WILL BE BETTER BECAUSE I WAS INVOLVED AND MADE AN HONEST EFFORT TO MOVE IT FORWARD.

If you don't have an answer immediately, that's okay.

That's why I'm giving you a week.

Because maybe **PURPOSE ISN'T SOMETHING YOU FIND BY SEARCHING HARDER.**

Maybe sometimes you recognize it by paying attention to what is already around you—

and deciding that because you are part of it,

YOU'RE GOING TO LEAVE SOMETHING BETTER THAN YOU FOUND IT.

SCRIPTURE

Galatians 6:9–10

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people."

PRAYER

God, thank You for the people who have helped us, believed in us, and made our lives better through their kindness.

Help us recognize the opportunities around us to do the same for others.

Give us the strength to keep doing what is right, even when nobody notices.

Teach us to work hard, remain humble, and use what we have been given to make something better than we found it.

Help us remember that our lives are not only about what we receive, but also about what we contribute.

Amen.

AFTER THE TABLE

When I returned to this lesson to write about it, I found myself spending more time on the word purpose than I expected. Not because I had never known what mattered to me. In one part of my life, I had known for a long time.

By the time Steel and Stone were in their later elementary-school years, I understood that being their dad was not something I wanted to fit into the spaces left over after work. It was a purpose I meant to keep living. I wanted to be involved in the fullest sense of the word. I still do.

That understanding did not arrive with a perfect plan. I was building a business and working long hours. Sometimes the boys came to the office with me and camped out upstairs while I worked. Those became memories of their own, but I began to recognize the difference between having my children nearby and actually engaging with them. I was their father, not their babysitter.

The adjustments came gradually. I became more selective about projects. I committed to leaving Sundays free of work. I remember putting my phone down on Friday evenings and not picking it back up for business until Monday morning. It was an act of engagement.

And that engagement was never only about the boys. Time alone with Steel, time alone with Stone, and time alone with Angela were not separate from our life

together. Each relationship was part of how our family was together. I wanted Angela to share in the joy of raising our sons with an involved husband and father, and in the security and togetherness we were building as a family.

I did not always handle every responsibility the way I later wished I had. There were school frustrations, for example, when I left more of the burden to Angela than I wanted to. Over time I became more involved in those conversations, too. Looking back, I can see a progression rather than one defining moment when I suddenly knew how to do everything right. This chapter brought another thought to mind: looking back can uncover disappointment. Sometimes what we regret cannot be repaired. If it could simply be changed, perhaps we would not carry the regret in the same way. But there may still be something useful to do with what we learn. We can try to make something better ahead of us, even when we cannot change what is behind us.

That does not make the past disappear. It does not turn a loss into a lesson we were somehow meant to receive. It asks only whether the understanding we have now can influence what we do next.

I also thought again about Budd Wormley. In our mornings together, before we went off to our very different businesses, we talked about families, parents, brothers and sisters, and being fathers. I admired the care he gave his son Adam, who needed constant assistance. But that was not why I told Budd's story in

this lesson. I told it because he saw a young man worth investing in, and he acted without expecting a return for himself.

I have hoped that someday I might be able to offer someone else an opportunity of that kind. Not necessarily the same amount of money, or the same circumstances. What stayed with me was his willingness to contribute because he believed it mattered.

That brings me back to the young men at Stone's Table. They are not my children. They have parents, families, histories, and relationships of their own. Some are close; some may be strained. Their challenges are not identical to mine, and the times they are growing up in are different from the ones I knew. I can offer my perspective, but I cannot expect them to live the life I lived.

Nor do I have a responsibility to pass along every lesson I have ever learned. I would rather share the ones I feel called in my heart to share, with the people I believe might benefit from hearing them. What they do with those words belongs to them.

Writing this reflection has helped me see why the question from that Thursday still matters to me. What will be better because I was here? It is not a question I can answer once and put away. I can ask it again in the way I show up for Angela, for Steel, as Stone's dad, and for the people whose lives still meet mine. I came to the Table believing I had something to teach. I never imagined how much I would have to learn.

LESSON 16

BACK OF STONE

Photograph placeholder

LESSON 17

What Are You Going to Better?



THE REFLECTION

What Are You Going to Better?

September 24, 2026

I was probably one of Mr. Lindon's worst students.

Seriously.

I had him for two different literature courses over two years at Hinsdale Central High School. He was stern, had high expectations, and I remember frustrating him more than once.

Reading was difficult for me. Keeping up with the assigned chapters was even harder. I was usually several chapters behind, and I certainly wasn't volunteering to read aloud in front of the class.

But it wasn't that I disliked what he was teaching.

When I managed to keep up, I genuinely enjoyed the discussions. I loved the way we could take apart a word, a sentence, a paragraph, or an entire chapter and discover something we hadn't recognized before.

I liked to **dissect** what I was reading.

And I respected Mr. Lindon.

He carried himself with class. Always well dressed, very deliberate, with a certain Hemingway persona about him.

The kind of gentleman you could imagine sitting quietly with a pipe or a good cigar, giving whatever was in front of him his complete attention.

But I always pictured another side of him, too.

An old-man badass.

I could imagine someone challenging or disrespecting him, and Mr. Lindon calmly removing his crisp button-down shirt, carefully folding it, and setting it aside.

There he'd stand in his white undershirt, raising his fists like a boxer from the 1920s, ready to settle the matter.

I don't know why I pictured him that way.

I just did.

And I thought he was pretty damn cool.

There was one assignment in particular I'll never forget.

We were studying *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. Every student was required to write a lengthy paper about the book and deliver a presentation to the class.

Each student was allotted two days.

Two days!

For a kid who struggled with reading and was already behind in the book, that was a pretty intimidating assignment.

So I approached Mr. Lindon with a proposition.

If I caught up with the reading, would he allow me to write a song about the book instead of a paper and perform it for the class?

He immediately agreed.

About a week later, I walked into his classroom carrying my acoustic guitar, accompanied by my best friend and longtime musical partner, Nick Hensley.

Nick and I had written a song together about *Brave New World* and the absence of genuine freedom in what was supposed to be a perfect society.

I played the guitar.

Nick sang.

Mr. Lindon had a habit of sitting on the corner of his desk, or sometimes even a student's desk, while presentations were being delivered.

That day, I remember him sitting on the corner of his own desk, one foot planted on the floor and the other hanging just above it.

When we finished playing, he started clapping.

He was smiling.

"That was incredible."

Then he stood up and continued applauding.

And the rest of the class, including all those smarty-pants who never seemed to have trouble keeping up with the assignments, started clapping too.

I received the only **A+** I ever earned from Mr. Lindon.

I remember walking into the hallway afterward, looking over at Nick, and saying,

"That worked."

We both started laughing.

More than thirty years have passed, and I can still picture that classroom.

Mr. Lindon sitting on the corner of his desk.

His expression when we finished playing.

And that feeling of having accomplished something I wasn't entirely sure I could pull off.

I've thought about that man many times throughout my adult life.

Whenever I find myself reading something closely, trying to understand what the author intended, or picking apart a passage to discover its meaning, I often think of Mr. Lindon.

It's funny how certain people remain with you.

Since Stone's passing, I've spent a considerable amount of time reading and writing. What began as a way of expressing my thoughts has developed into something I genuinely enjoy.

A passion I hadn't anticipated.

Along the way, I began studying the Book of Proverbs.

I wanted to understand Scripture beyond simply reading the words on a page. I wanted to examine the language, the circumstances, the people speaking, and the meaning behind what was written.

I wanted to ask questions.

Sometimes difficult questions.

And I wanted the freedom to challenge what I thought I understood.

So I began developing an interactive Scripture study for myself.

I spent time writing the instructions that would guide it, trying to create an environment where I could examine Scripture in its historical and literary context without allowing contemporary opinions or arguments to dictate the interpretation.

I could study a single word, work through a sentence, examine an entire passage, or spend as much time as I wanted on one chapter.

There was no pressure to keep up.

No assignment due.

And no Mr. Lindon waiting for me to finish the next five chapters.

Although I imagine he'd have appreciated the effort.

What surprised me most was how much I enjoyed building and using it.

I found myself genuinely excited.

And considering everything that had happened in my life over the previous months, feeling that kind of excitement was something I noticed.

I began wondering whether some of the boys might enjoy exploring Scripture this way, too.

Not because I had suddenly become qualified to teach them the Bible.

Quite the opposite.

I was a student myself.

But perhaps we could learn something together.

By September 24, I was looking forward to another Thursday evening around the fire.

I had something I was excited to share, and I was curious how the boys would receive it.

I also knew that whatever I had prepared would only be one part of the evening.

The conversations mattered.

Their willingness to participate mattered.

And I was learning that sometimes the most valuable thing I could do was give them an opportunity to speak without feeling the need to correct or direct every answer.

That evening, everyone participated.

I was pleased with that. Several of the boys spoke about wanting to improve relationships within their families. I remember thinking, **that's a good base to start at.**

It didn't have to be anything more.

There were moments when I could see the beginnings of something I hoped would continue developing within the fellowship. We weren't there yet, particularly when it came to holding one another accountable for the things we talked about.

But we were having the conversations.

And that was a beginning.

When I think about Mr. Lindon today, I think about more than the grade he gave me.

I think about the opportunity.

He had a classroom full of students and a responsibility to help them learn. He could have insisted that I complete the assignment exactly as everyone else had.

Instead, he allowed me to approach it differently.

He still expected me to do the work.

And I did.

Throughout my life, I've been fortunate to know other men who offered me opportunities of their own.

My dad, along with men I came to know through professional relationships that eventually developed into mentorship and friendship.

They weren't all alike, and the circumstances that brought us together were different.

But when I think about the men who have had the greatest influence on my life, I recognize something they shared.

They gave me opportunities.

They allowed me to fail.

They allowed me to get back up and try again.

And they were in my corner.

I don't imagine any of them knew exactly what I would carry forward from those relationships.

Mr. Lindon certainly couldn't have known that more than thirty years later, I'd still be talking about a literature assignment and remembering the way he stood up and applauded.

Yet here I am.

And now, on Thursday evenings, I find myself sitting with a group of young men, sharing experiences, listening to theirs, and hoping that somewhere along the way, something worthwhile might stay with them.

I don't know what that will be.

I don't know whether they'll remember a particular conversation, something someone said around the fire, or simply the fact that they had a place where they could show up and be heard.

But I do know how much it has meant to me to have men in my corner.

And I know what it feels like when someone gives you an opportunity to try.

Perhaps that's enough to begin with.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE — THE FELLOWSHIP PROJECT

Stone's Table #17

What Are You Going to Better?

Thursday, September 24, 2026

OPENING — THE STONES CAME HOME WITH YOU

Say Grace:

Last week I gave each of you a stone.

And I intentionally didn't ask you to write something on it immediately.

I wanted you to **take it home.**

Think about it.

The question wasn't:

"What is your purpose in life?"

That's a hell of a question to expect somebody to answer sitting around a table on a Thursday night.

The question was much simpler:

What is something you want to better?

Something outside of yourself.

Maybe it's a relationship.

Maybe it's your family.

Maybe it's something at work.

Maybe it's something you're building.

Maybe it's helping somebody.

Maybe it's something you haven't even started yet.

It doesn't have to change the world.

It just has to mean enough to you that you are willing to **contribute something toward making it better than you found it.**

Tonight I want to hear what you came up with.

But before I ask any of you to share yours—

I'll share mine.

MY STONE — WISDOM

The word I put on the front of my stone is:

WISDOM

I've got nearly fifty years behind me now.

And there's an old cliché:

"If I only knew then what I know now."

The problem is, I can't go back and tell the twenty-year-old version of myself what I've learned.

But maybe I can do something better with it.

I can give some of it to you.

Not by standing here pretending I've got life figured out.

I don't.

I've made good decisions.

I've made bad ones.

I've hurt people. I've been hurt.

I've succeeded at things, and I've failed at others.

I've learned what matters.

And I've learned that some of the things I once thought mattered really didn't.

So part of my purpose at **Stone's Table** is going to be taking those nearly fifty years of life and continuing to learn from them.

And one way I'm going to do that is by intentionally studying **Proverbs.**

I want to study wisdom because if I'm going to sit at this Table and offer you guys guidance, **I want what I give you to have a sound foundation underneath it.**

I want to take what Scripture teaches about wisdom and hold it against what I've experienced in my own life.

Where did I get it right?

Where did I get it wrong?

What did it cost me?

What would I do differently?

And most importantly:

What can somebody else learn from it without having to spend twenty or thirty years learning it the hard way?

DOES THAT BREAK MY OWN RULE?

There was something about my stone that bothered me after I chose it.

I told all of you to choose something that wasn't simply about **bettering yourself.**

But if I pursue wisdom...

I'm going to become better because of it.

So I started wondering:

Am I contradicting my own assignment?

And I realized something.

There's a difference between **benefiting from something** and being the **destination of it.**

If one of you chooses to become a better listener because you want to improve a relationship, becoming a better listener improves **you.**

But it doesn't end with you.

If you become better at something because you want to help your dad, your family, your girlfriend, your friends or somebody you work with—

you're going to grow too.

That's not a contradiction.

That's probably how this is supposed to work.

So yes.

Pursuing wisdom will hopefully make me a better man.

But becoming a wiser man isn't where I want it to end.

I want to become wiser so I have something worthwhile to give.

That's why I wrote something else on the back of my stone.

Wisdom received.
Wisdom lived.
Wisdom shared.

T.A.

First, I've got to be willing to **receive it.**
Then I've got to actually **live it.**
And only then do I really have something worth **sharing.**

NOW I WANT TO HEAR YOURS

So that's mine.

WISDOM.

Now let's go around the Table.
Nobody needs a speech.
And if you're still working through yours, say that.
But if you wrote something down, tell us:

What's on your stone?

And more importantly:

Why did you choose it?

[STOP HERE. LET THE TABLE TALK.]
Note to self:
Don't rush this.
Ask questions when something catches your attention.
Let the other guys ask questions.
Tonight isn't about correcting anybody's answer.

There isn't a right word.
The point is understanding why that word matters to the man who wrote it.

THE STONE ISN'T THE PURPOSE

There's one last thing I want you to understand.

Writing something on a rock doesn't accomplish anything.

The stone isn't the purpose.

It's a reminder of the purpose.

Eventually I want these stones to become part of something bigger we're building here.

Not just physically in **Stone's Garden**, but between us.

Because if I know what's written on your stone and understand why it matters to you, I can remember it.

I can ask you about it.

I can encourage you when you're working toward it.

And maybe someday when you're struggling with it, somebody sitting at this Table can remind you why you wrote it in the first place.

That's part of what fellowship is supposed to look like.

We don't have to accomplish everything alone.

Closing Thought:

ONE MORE THING — WHERE WE'RE GOING NEXT

My stone has also led me somewhere I wasn't necessarily expecting.

Choosing **WISDOM** made me realize that I don't just want to prepare something every Thursday, talk for twenty minutes and send everybody home.

I want to keep learning too.

And I want us to start looking at some of these things together.

So we're going to begin something I'm calling the:

STONE'S TABLE STUDY

This isn't me turning Thursday night into school.

And it's definitely not me standing up here pretending I'm suddenly a Bible scholar.

I'm a student too.

I wanna invite you to Dive in and widen your knowledge on scripture and how it can pertain to your life. This is not a requirement for you to do in order to sit at Stone's Table. It's just something to do outside of our Thursday nights so if you feel that you wanna participate, thats totally up to you.

We're going to take Scripture, slow it down, ask questions about it, figure out who is speaking, what it's actually saying, and then do something I think matters even more:

Hold it against our own lives.

Where have we seen this?

Where have we gotten it right?

Where have we screwed it up?

What could it change?

And what might somebody else at this Table learn from what we've lived?

But before Being able to do that we need to understand the scripture we're reading.

I'll send everybody the introduction to the **Stone's Table Study** in our group text tonight so you can read through it on your own.

We're not starting the study tonight.

Tonight belongs to these stones.

But this is where we're going next.

And for me, it starts with one word:

WISDOM.

Because I can't go backward and teach the younger version of myself everything I know today.

But there are young men sitting around this Table who are still going forward.

Maybe some of what we learn together can help each other along the way.

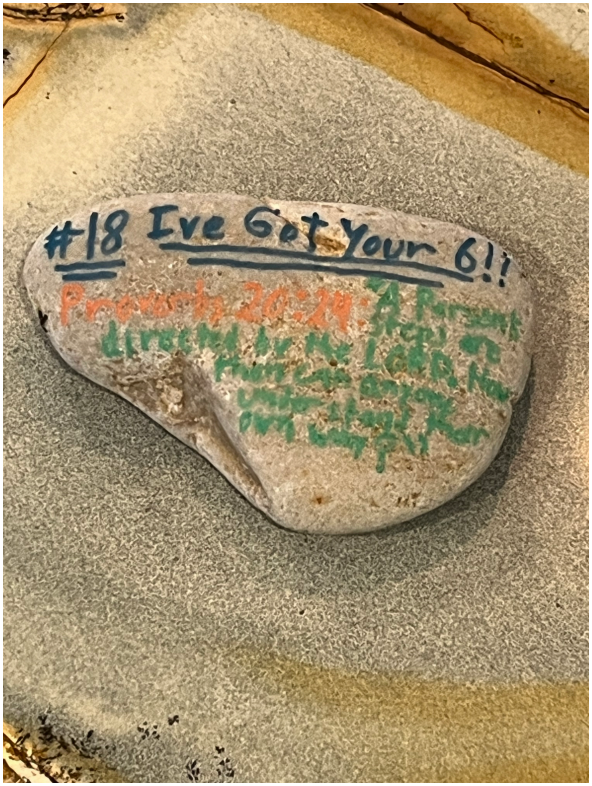
Closeout Prayer -

LESSON 17



LESSON 18

I've Got Your Six



THE REFLECTION

I've Got Your Six

October 1, 2026

Angela and I were in Mexico that Thursday, enjoying a vacation together. For the first time since Stone's Table began, I wouldn't be there to sit with the boys.

But I didn't want my absence to mean the Table wouldn't happen.

I had asked Andrew, one of Steel's friends, to take the lesson I had prepared and lead the gathering. With his military background, I thought he could bring something to the conversation that I couldn't. I gave him permission to change the lesson, shorten it, add to it, and make it his own.

On Sunday night, September 27, I sent him the lesson along with a message explaining what I hoped he would do with it.

I didn't want him to feel obligated to read my words exactly as written. I encouraged him to change things, add his own experiences, or tell the story in a way that sounded like him.

I wasn't asking Andrew to become me for an evening. I was asking him to bring himself to the Table.

When he sent back his thoughts a couple of days later, I was impressed.

He described his experience leading men in military combat support units, where responsibility wasn't simply a matter of completing an assignment. It meant paying attention to the men around you, sometimes putting their needs ahead of your own, and building the kind of trust that allowed everyone to do their part.

He had taken the time to consider what I was asking of him, and he had something of his own to offer.

Thursday evening, while Angela and I were away, Andrew sent me a video.

The boys weren't simply sitting around the Table. They were moving throughout the room, finding the young men whose stones they had drawn, and connecting with the ones who had drawn theirs.

Each had two conversations to make happen, and with everyone doing the same thing, it took some patience and effort to find the right people. It wasn't necessarily an easy exercise to organize, but by the end of the evening, everyone had connected with both individuals.

I wasn't there to hear those conversations or see how every moment unfolded. But I knew the exercise had brought them together in a different way.

Later, Andrew told me he had been nervous. He thought he might have moved through the lesson a little quickly, but the guys listened, respected him, and gave him their attention.

He also told me he enjoyed contributing.

That meant something to me.

I was proud of Andrew for stepping into something unfamiliar and accepting the responsibility I had placed in his hands.

In the days that followed, a couple of the young men told me this had been one of their favorite Thursdays. They enjoyed the opportunity to move around, engage in conversation, and connect with one another.

What I had hoped would encourage accountability had also given them another reason to enjoy being together.

That same night, thousands of miles from home, Angela and I were finding a little peace of our own.

It was a different kind of vacation. We were enjoying one another, finding moments to breathe, while still seeing Stone in the smallest things around us.

Lying in bed in the early hours of October 2, I wrote in my journal:

"It is comforting to see her relax, I feel like I can breathe with her".

There was something comforting about those moments together, even while the heaviness of missing Stone remained.

Back home, the boys had gathered around the Table that had grown from his absence.

But looking back, I think one of the most meaningful parts of that week happened before Thursday ever arrived.

In my message to Andrew, I had written about how fitting it was that I would have to practice the very lesson I was asking him to deliver.

I was asking Andrew to carry something that mattered deeply to me. And in doing so, I had to learn to trust him with it.

I knew what I was asking of him.

What I was beginning to understand was what it meant for me.

I could build a place for them to gather. But I couldn't build their fellowship for them.

I had trusted Andrew with something deeply personal, and he had given something of himself in return.

The boys were together. Angela and I were finding moments of peace. And Stone was still present in the ways we remembered him, missed him, and continued loving the people he loved.

I wasn't there to sit at the Table that Thursday. But I was grateful to know there were young men willing to keep gathering around it.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE — THE FELLOWSHIP PROJECT

Stone's Table #18

I'VE GOT YOUR SIX

Purpose Needs Steps. Fellowship Helps Us Keep Walking.
Thursday, October 1, 2026

A NOTE FROM TED

Boys,

Obviously, I'm not sitting at the Table with you tonight. Angela and I are in Mexico, but I wanted Stone's Table to happen without me.

Actually, I think this may be the perfect week for it.

Last Thursday you guys took something that started as a lesson and turned it into a conversation. Everybody around that Table shared what was written on his stone and, more importantly, why it mattered.

I heard things from some of you that I probably wouldn't have known otherwise.

And you heard those things from each other.

That's where tonight begins.

I've trusted Andrew with the lesson I had planned. I gave him the freedom to change it, add to it, shorten it, and make it his own.

And in a little while, you're going to trust another man at that Table with your stone.

There's something pretty fitting about that.

Have a great night together, boys.

I also want to take this time to let you know how proud I am of you guys, I truly mean it… what you are building for yourself, for the group, for me and Angela and Steel is something so special if you don't already recognize it I promise you will

I'll see you when I get home.

– Ted

ANDREW – PICK IT UP FROM HERE AFTER READING THROUGH THIS

Last week everybody around this Table shared what was written on his stone.

Tonight isn't about choosing another word.

And it isn't about explaining everything again.

Tonight is about what happens next.

Because having something that matters to you is one thing.

Moving toward it is another.

Proverbs 20:24 says:

"A person's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand their own way?"

None of us completely understands the road ahead.

And maybe we're not supposed to.

Proverbs 16:9 puts another piece beside it:

"In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps."

We plan.

We move.

We make decisions.

We take responsibility.

But we also recognize that none of us can see the entire road from where we're standing.

So instead of asking:

"Do I have my whole life figured out?"

Maybe there's a better question:

WHAT'S MY NEXT STEP?

Look at your stone.

Whatever you wrote on it matters enough that you put it there.

So ask yourself:

Have I taken a step toward it?

Not:

Have I accomplished it?

Not:

Did I completely change something in one week?

Just:

DID I TAKE A STEP?

Because eventually, small steps become a direction.

And direction, given enough time, becomes part of the life you lived.

I'VE GOT YOUR SIX

There's a phrase most everybody here has probably heard:

"I'VE GOT YOUR SIX."

Andrew — this part is yours.

Talk to the guys about what that phrase means to you from your own military experience.

What does it actually mean to know somebody has your six?

What responsibility does the guy in front still have?

What responsibility does the guy watching his six take on?

And maybe just as importantly—

what DOESN'T it mean?

Before moving on, talk to them a little about **accountability** from your perspective.

What did accountability look like when other men depended on you?

What did it mean when you depended on them?

And where is the line between **holding somebody accountable** and trying to control them or do their job for them?

*(ANDREW'S OWN WORDS page 418)

Then pick back up below.

THE TEAM

Think about a SEAL team going out on a mission.

Every man on that team may have a different assignment.

THEY EACH HAVE THEIR OWN ASSIGNMENT.

But they're all part of the same mission.

Each man is responsible for doing his job while trusting the men around him to do theirs.

That's where "I've got your six" becomes more than a cool saying.

It means:

I'M HANDLING MY RESPONSIBILITY —

BUT I'M PAYING ATTENTION TO YOU TOO.

If one guy starts struggling, the rest of the team doesn't just say:

"Well, that's his assignment. Good luck."

They communicate.

They adjust.

Somebody might step over and help.

But everybody doesn't abandon his own assignment and start doing that man's job for him.

Because now we've created another problem.

EVERYBODY STILL HAS AN ASSIGNMENT.

And that's exactly how I want you to think about these stones.

Whatever your stone represents—

THAT'S YOUR ASSIGNMENT.

The man who is about to carry your stone isn't responsible for accomplishing it for you.

He's another member of this fellowship saying:

I'VE GOT YOUR SIX.

I'm paying attention.

If you're struggling, I'll listen.

If you've stopped moving toward something you told me mattered, I might remind you.

And if you need somebody to take a couple of steps beside you—

I'll walk with you.

But I won't walk it for you.

Because I've got something of my own I'm supposed to be working toward too.

I have my own stone.

And somebody else around this Table is about to be holding mine.

So remember:

MY RESPONSIBILITY IS MINE.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITY IS YOURS.

BUT YOUR SUCCESS STILL MATTERS TO ME.

That's fellowship.

That's iron sharpening iron.

That's having somebody's six.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO CARRY MY ASSIGNMENT.

BUT DON'T LET ME FORGET WHY I'M CARRYING IT.

YOU'RE HOLDING HIS STONE — YOU DON'T OWN HIS PURPOSE

There's one thing we need to make clear before these stones change hands.

When you leave here carrying somebody else's stone, you are not responsible for accomplishing what is written on it.

IT'S STILL HIS STONE EVEN WHILE YOU'RE HOLDING IT.

If he tells you:

"Man, I haven't done anything with this."

You don't necessarily need to tell him what to do.

Ask him:

"What's stopping you?"

Or:

"What's one step you could take?"

Sometimes it might even be:

"Come on. I'll go with you."

Maybe you take a couple steps beside him.

But eventually he's got to walk.

Because you can't live another man's purpose for him.

I CAN WALK WITH YOU

WITHOUT WALKING FOR YOU.

THE EXCHANGE

Everybody put your stone into the bowl.

Mix them up.

Each man draws one.

If you draw your own, put it back and draw again.

Otherwise—

THAT'S THE STONE YOU'RE TAKING HOME.

No trading because you'd rather have your buddy's.

Actually, if you draw the stone of somebody you don't know particularly well—

that might be exactly what needs to happen.

Because Stone's Table shouldn't only strengthen the friendships that were already strong before we started sitting here.

Your stone might go across the room.

That man's stone might go somewhere completely different.

And another one crosses back the other direction.

Pretty soon—

IT BECOMES A WEB.

Not a bunch of two-man partnerships.

A FELLOWSHIP.

NOW FIND THE OWNER

Look at the initials on the stone you're holding.

Sometime tonight, find that person.

There's no formal interview.

There's no worksheet.

And there's no hurry.

Just talk.

You already heard him explain his stone last week.

Now go a little deeper.

Ask:

"Tell me more about this."

"What would taking another step toward this look like?"

"Is there anything I can actually do to help?"

And maybe:

"What don't you need from me?"

Because accountability has boundaries too.

ACCOUNTABILITY ISN'T CONTROL.

It isn't me telling you how to live your life.

It's you telling me something matters to you—and giving me permission to care whether you keep moving toward it.

You aren't taking control of his life.

You're learning how to support him without taking over.

The owner needs to understand something too:

By allowing another man to carry your stone, you're saying:

YOU HAVE PERMISSION TO ASK ME ABOUT THIS.

Then let the night happen.

Don't organize the life out of it.

Eat.

Talk.

Move around.

If the guy you need is already talking to somebody else, wait.

Listen.

Talk with somebody else.

Let the web form naturally.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT BEFORE TED GETS BACK

The conversation doesn't end when you leave tonight.

The **STONE HOLDER** has the next responsibility.

Before the next Stone's Table with Ted, you initiate contact with the owner of the stone you're carrying.

Don't make him chase you.

Call him.

Text him.

Grab lunch.

Stop by his work.

Whatever makes sense.

You don't need to interrogate him.

And nobody needs a progress report.

Just remember:

HE TRUSTED YOU WITH SOMETHING

HE SAID MATTERS TO HIM.

Ask how it's going.

Ask whether he's taken another step.

Maybe ask whether he needs somebody beside him for one of those steps.

And then listen.

That's it.

CLOSING — LOOK AROUND THE TABLE

Before everybody leaves tonight, look around this Table.

Somebody here is carrying your stone.

And you're carrying somebody else's.

Nobody above anybody else.

Nobody responsible for living somebody else's life.

But nobody completely indifferent to somebody else's life either.

THAT'S FELLOWSHIP, NOT HIERARCHY.

Stone's Table was never supposed to become just a place where we eat on Thursday nights.

It's becoming something else.

I know something that matters to you.

You know something that matters to somebody else.

We have permission to ask questions.

We encourage each other.

We sharpen each other.

Sometimes we walk a couple steps beside each other.

But every one of us remains responsible for taking our own steps.

We might not know exactly where the road leads.

That's okay.

WE JUST KEEP TAKING THE NEXT MEANINGFUL STEP.

And we don't have to pretend we're doing it alone.

I'VE GOT YOUR SIX.

SOMEBODY'S GOT MINE.

AND WE KEEP MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER.

IN ANDREW'S OWN WORDS

Stone's Table #18 — I've Got Your Six

September 29, 2026

As I prepared for Thursday's gathering, I had asked Andrew to bring his military experience into the lesson and share what having another man's six meant to him.

He sent me the following thoughts ahead of time, drawing from his six years of experience in combat support units.

These are Andrew's own words, preserved as he shared them with me.

Stones Table Questions To Visit During Reading

- **What does "I've got your six" from my military experience/perspective mean?**

From my experience working within several combat support units for the last 6 years, this phrase typically meant that someone was watching out for me or others, and we didn't have to worry about what was going on behind us.

- **Front & Rear**

In a patrol movement, your lead personal or vehicle's responsibility is to identify hazards, obstacles and enemy troops. Your rear guy or your "six" is your security, their job is to be sure nothing or nobody approaches from behind & to alert your team of any situations.

• Note: “Focus on what’s in front of you, I’ll watch what’s behind you.” In this position, you’re taking on a role of responsibility based on the trust you’ve created within your team/peers.

- **Accountability**

Accountability from my perspective means taking ownership of your actions, responsibilities, and most importantly the people around you.

- **Accountability when others have relied on me**

As a team leader, I had to not only make sure I was taken care of, but that the people around me or in my team were as well. This meant I ate last, showered last, and fell asleep last, etc. By putting my guys first, this built a bond that revolved around trust.

- **Accountability when I depended on someone else**

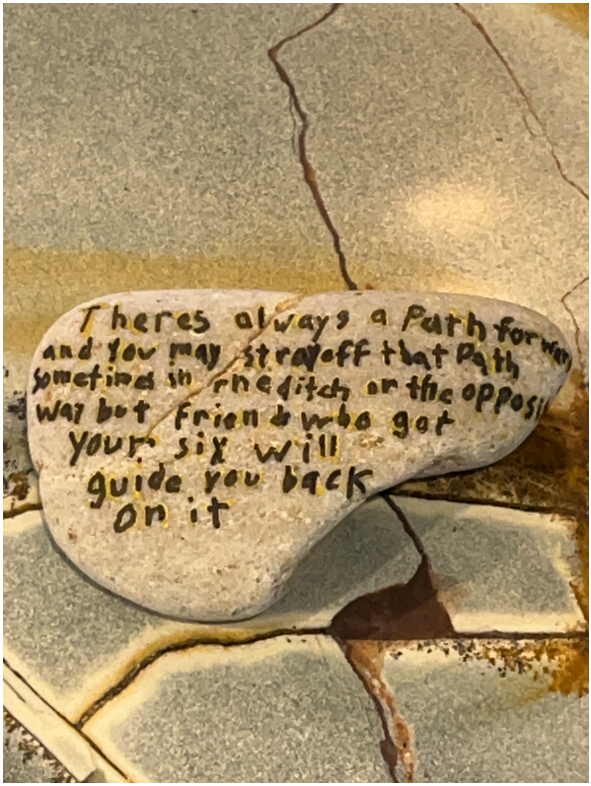
The trust by putting others before me, typically you would see actions reciprocate. This meant others would take on tasks while I slept, ate, showered, etc. This wasn’t so much a “I scratch your back, you scratch mine” scenario, but as long as we all looked out for one another everything was going to be okay.

- **Where do we draw the line of holding someone accountable vs becoming controlling**

Holding someone accountable to me, meant I gave someone a responsibility & the resources they needed to meet that goal or task and expecting them to own the result.

Controlling someone is losing the trust you've established over time & not letting someone succeed on their own. There could be many ways to control someone whether that be checking every little step, consistently telling someone what to do, or even completely taking when they aren't doing something they way you would. Failure is sometimes the hardest/ easiest way to success as it teaches an individual what not to do/ think in which that can be passed on to others with confidence when the task on hand is completed.

LESSON 18


Theres always a Path for you
and you may stray off that Path
sometimes in the ditch or the oppos
war but friends who got
your six will
guide you back
On it

LESSON 19

Are You Owning Your Stone?



THE REFLECTION

Are You Owning Your Stone?

Somewhere along the way, I began to recognize that these Thursday evenings were becoming more than individual conversations. One lesson was beginning to build upon another.

We had talked about purpose. About making something or someone better because we were here.

We had talked about fellowship. About having each other's six and recognizing that we don't have to face every challenge alone.

But there was another part of that conversation we hadn't finished.

What happens after we make the commitment?

It's one thing to sit around a table, surrounded by people who care about you, and declare what you intend to do.

It's another thing to get up the following morning and begin doing it.

And perhaps that's where the real work begins.

I had asked these young men to choose a stone and give it meaning. But the stone itself wasn't going to change anything.

Neither were the words written on it.

What mattered was what each of us was willing to do because of those words.

And I was no exception.

I had chosen WISDOM.

At nearly fifty years old, I was asking myself to become a student again. Not because I believed I had nothing to offer, but because I was beginning to understand how much more there was to learn.

There was something important about making that commitment alongside these young men rather than simply asking them to make one.

I wasn't there to measure their progress from the other side of the Table. I had a stone to own, too.

And that's where Lesson 19 began to take shape.

Not as a demand for results.

Not as another assignment.

But as a conversation about the difference between wanting to become better and accepting the responsibility of becoming better.

Because having somebody's six doesn't mean carrying their stone for them.

Sometimes it simply means reminding them why they picked it up.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE — THE FELLOWSHIP PROJECT

LESSON #19 | THURSDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2026

ARE YOU OWNING YOUR STONE?

Trust • Accountability • Fellowship

Continuing our journey from "What Will Be Better Because I Was Here?" and "I've Got Your Six."

OPENING — A REFLECTION ON LAST THURSDAY

Before we get into tonight's lesson, there's something I want to share with you guys.

I've been thinking a lot about last Thursday and what happened here while Angela and I were away.

And I want to start with Andrew.

I saw something in Andrew before I ever needed anything from him.

When I first met Andrew roughly two years ago, there was something about him that I liked.

He never seemed to speak irrationally. He was reserved, yet carried a certain swagger that made you interested in getting to know him.

Beneath that calm, cool attitude, I sensed something else.

Compassion. Understanding. Patience.

Now, I'm sure there were a few nights when all you boys got a little rowdy, and things carried on into the early morning hours, testing my patience.

But even then, I knew Andrew was somebody I wanted in my boys' lives.

I knew he was somebody I wanted to invest in knowing.

I didn't know what May 9 would bring.

I didn't know that a week later, on May 16, Andrew would walk up to me in our backyard and embrace me after Stone's celebration of life.

And I certainly didn't know that five months later, I would be asking him to lead a gathering created in Stone's honor.

But I knew I wanted him in my boys' lives.

That's a powerful thing to recognize in someone.

And I'm grateful I trusted that intuition.

I'm proud of Andrew.

And I'm proud of every one of you sitting here.

Because I've been watching something happen over these past several months.

You guys are becoming more comfortable opening up to one another.

You're learning to speak candidly, to listen without judgment, and to trust that the person sitting beside you genuinely cares about what you're carrying.

That's not something that happens overnight.

It's something we're building together.

THAT HOMESICK FEELING

Last Thursday, while Angela and I were in Mexico, I experienced something I wasn't expecting.

I felt homesick.

Not because I was worried Stone's Table wouldn't survive a Thursday without me.

Not because I thought nobody would show up.

I simply missed being here.

I wanted to hear your conversations, witness your growth, and be part of something that has become deeply meaningful in my own life.

When I first began gathering you guys, I wanted to create a place where you could continue coming together.

Now, several months later, I've become just as invested in being part of your lives as I am in helping you develop your own.

And I don't believe that contradicts what we've been discussing about contributing to something beyond ourselves.

I believe it's the natural reward of doing exactly that.

WHAT ANDREW TAUGHT ME

Before leaving, I asked Andrew if he would deliver the message I had planned.

But I encouraged him to put his own words to it.

And he did.

I gave him the responsibility and trusted him with the outcome.

And without necessarily intending to, **I practiced the very principle Andrew would teach that evening.**

I didn't control how he delivered it.

I allowed him to own it.

And he came back with something that made me proud.

That's a remarkable illustration of the difference between **leadership and control**.

And it happened naturally.

Last week, Andrew stood here and talked about **having somebody's six**.

What he may not have realized is that he was doing exactly that for me.

I trusted Andrew to carry something important to me.

He carried it.

And in doing so, he helped me recognize that what we're building is beginning to stand on more shoulders than my own.

That's fellowship.

And that's leadership.

And there's something I want all of us to recognize tonight:

TRUST ISN'T JUST SOMETHING WE ASK OTHERS TO GIVE US.

IT'S SOMETHING WE GIVE THEM THE OPPORTUNITY TO EARN.

That's what happened between Andrew and me.

And it's what we're beginning to experience with one another.

Because **accountability without trust feels like supervision.**

Accountability built on trust feels like fellowship.

And that's exactly what we're building.

One stone at a time.

SCRIPTURE READING #1

PROVERBS 27:17 (KJV)

"Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend."

Think about that.

Iron doesn't sharpen itself.

It requires contact with something else capable of challenging its edge.

And sometimes that contact creates friction.

But friction isn't always a bad thing.

Sometimes it's exactly what's necessary to make something better.

The people we surround ourselves with should challenge us to become better men.

Not by controlling our decisions.

Not by taking over our responsibilities.

But by helping us recognize what we're capable of becoming.

And sometimes that means hearing something we don't necessarily want to hear.

That's where trust becomes important.

Because when you know somebody genuinely cares about you, you're more willing to listen when they challenge you.

TONIGHT'S LESSON

ARE YOU OWNING YOUR STONE?

A few weeks ago, I asked each of you to choose a stone.

And on that stone, write one word representing something you wanted to make better because you were here.

Not necessarily something that would benefit you personally.

Something or someone outside yourself.

I chose **WISDOM**.

And I committed myself to studying Proverbs.

Not simply to become a wiser man.

But to receive wisdom, live it, and eventually share it with somebody who might benefit from what I've learned.

WISDOM RECEIVED.

WISDOM LIVED.

WISDOM SHARED.

That's my stone.

That's my responsibility.

And while I hope every one of you will encourage me along the way, none of you can fulfill that commitment for me.

I HAVE TO OWN IT.

And the same is true for each of you.

OWNERSHIP IS MORE THAN GOOD INTENTIONS

There's something Andrew wrote in his message last week that really caught my attention.

He was discussing the difference between accountability and control.

And he said something I thought was incredibly powerful:

"Expecting them to own the result."

Not simply complete the assignment.

OWN THE RESULT.

There's a difference.

It's easy to say we're going to do something.

It's another thing entirely to accept responsibility for what happens because of our actions.

And sometimes, what happens isn't what we expected.

Sometimes we fail.

Sometimes we disappoint ourselves.

Sometimes we discover that what we committed to is harder than we imagined.

But here's what I want you to understand.

OWNERSHIP DOESN'T MEAN YOU'LL ALWAYS SUCCEED.

IT MEANS YOU DON'T WALK AWAY FROM YOUR RESPONSIBILITY WHEN YOU DON'T.

Andrew explained that failure can sometimes be one of our greatest teachers.

I agree.

But only when we're willing to learn from it.

Otherwise, we're simply repeating the same mistakes and expecting different results.

And that brings us back to wisdom.

A MAN WHO CAN ACCEPT CORRECTION IS A MAN WHO CAN CONTINUE GROWING.

ACCOUNTABILITY IS NOT CONTROL

Think about what Andrew shared from his military experience.

As a team leader, he ate last.

He showered last.

He went to sleep last.

Not because he was less important than the other men.

But because he understood that **leadership carries responsibility for the people around you.**

And eventually, those men began looking after him in return.

Not because they owed him a favor.

But because they trusted one another.

That's the kind of accountability I want us to understand.

I CAN SUPPORT YOU WITHOUT CONTROLLING YOU.

I CAN CHALLENGE YOU WITHOUT CONDEMNING YOU.

I CAN STAND BESIDE YOU WITHOUT TAKING OVER YOUR RESPONSIBILITY.

And perhaps most importantly:

I CAN LET YOU FAIL WITHOUT ABANDONING YOU.

That's what having somebody's six means.

It's not about preventing every mistake.

It's about making sure that when somebody stumbles, they know they aren't standing alone.

THE TABLE — LET'S TALK ABOUT OUR STONES

Tonight, I want to spend some time hearing from you guys.

Not because I'm checking up on you.

And certainly not because I expect everybody to have accomplished something extraordinary in the past couple of weeks.

I want to know what you've experienced.

Let's start with the stones we exchanged.

I'd like each of you to think about a few things.

1. THE COMMITMENT

Do you remember the word you chose and why you chose it?

Does it still carry the same meaning today?

2. THE RESPONSIBILITY

Have you taken any steps toward making something better because of that commitment?

Even something small?

3. THE FELLOWSHIP

Have you connected with the person whose stone you received?

And if you haven't, what's been standing in the way?

4. THE CHALLENGE

Are you comfortable allowing somebody else to hold you accountable?

Or do you find yourself resisting when somebody challenges you?

5. THE BIGGER PICTURE

Has somebody at this Table helped you recognize something about yourself that you might not have recognized otherwise?

Allow the conversation to develop naturally. Don't rush to answer these questions for them.

CLOSING THOUGHT

There's something I want you guys to remember as we continue building this fellowship.

WE ARE NOT HERE TO BUILD PERFECT MEN.

We're here to build relationships that encourage us to become better men.

There's going to be failure.

There's going to be disappointment.

There will be times when we don't live up to the commitments we've made.

But that doesn't mean we've failed at fellowship.

FELLOWSHIP IS WHAT HELPS US FIND OUR WAY FORWARD WHEN WE DO.

And I want you to think about something.

A few weeks ago, I asked:

WHAT WILL BE BETTER BECAUSE I WAS HERE?

Last Thursday, Andrew answered that question without even realizing it.

STONE'S TABLE WAS BETTER BECAUSE ANDREW WAS HERE.

Not because he delivered a perfect message.

Not because he had all the answers.

But because he was willing to step forward, accept responsibility, and contribute something of himself.

And every one of you has that same opportunity.

Not necessarily to stand here and deliver a message.

But to make somebody else's life a little better because you were part of it.

SCRIPTURE READING #2

GALATIANS 6:2 (KJV)

"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

I want to leave you with that thought.

Because there's an important distinction between **carrying somebody's burden** and **taking ownership of their responsibility**.

We can help somebody through a difficult time.

We can encourage them when they're struggling.

We can stand beside them when things aren't going their way.

But we cannot live their lives for them.

And we shouldn't try.

TRUE FELLOWSHIP DOESN'T REMOVE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY.

IT GIVES US THE STRENGTH TO CARRY IT.

And that's what I hope we continue building here.

A place where we can speak openly.

A place where we can challenge one another.

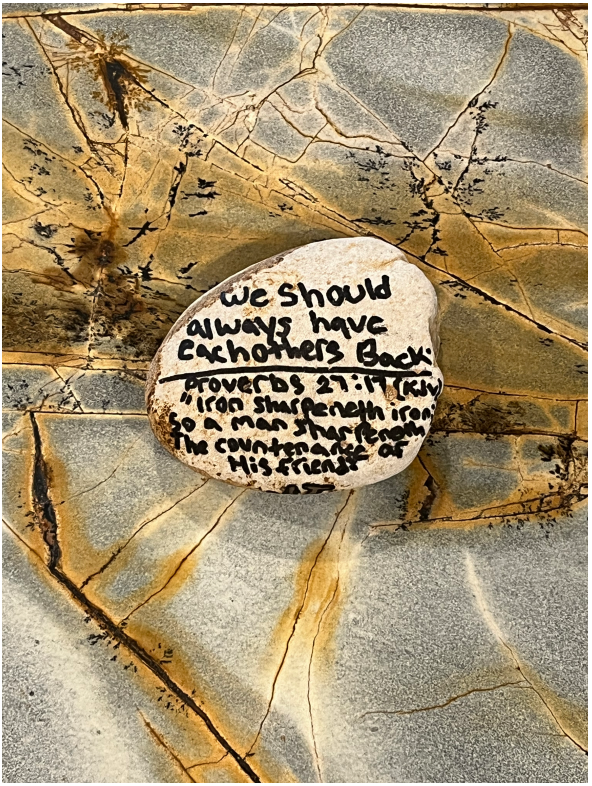
A place where we can make mistakes without losing the respect and friendship of the men sitting beside us.

Because at the end of the day, I don't need you to carry my stone.

I NEED YOU TO REMIND ME WHY I PICKED IT UP.

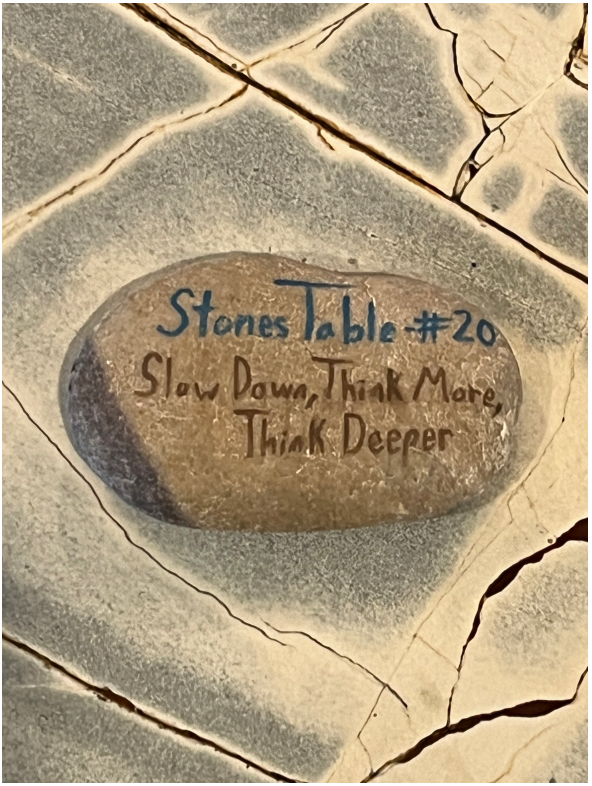
And I promise to do the same for you.

LESSON 19


We Should
always have
Eachothers Back:
Proverbs 27:17 (KJV)
"Iron sharpeneth iron;
so a man sharpeneth
the countenance of
his friend."

LESSON 20

Slow Down. Think More. Think Deeper.



THE REFLECTION

Slow Down. Think More. Think Deeper.

Around our eighteenth gathering, I began noticing a change in the direction of my writing. I was thinking more about the purpose of Stone's Table and what I hoped it might become.

As the weeks passed, that purpose was becoming clearer.

My heart is for this fellowship to grow, perhaps someday into something much larger than I originally imagined. But whatever its future holds, I hope it continues to grow from the foundation of these Thursday evenings.

The relationships, the trust, the willingness to show up, and the purpose behind our gatherings are what give this fellowship its foundation.

If Stone's Table is going to grow, I want that growth to happen naturally. I don't want to become so focused on what it could become that I overlook what it already means to the young men sitting around the Table.

And perhaps that's something I need to be mindful of myself.

By our twentieth gathering, I wanted to encourage the boys to look a little further into their own lives. To become curious about the things they believed, the people they knew, and the questions they hadn't yet thought to ask.

I wasn't asking them to find something wrong with themselves or suggesting that they needed to change.

I simply wanted them to consider what they might discover if they gave themselves the opportunity.

You'll notice a little change in my writing this week. I decided to give the boys a little more airtime. **I wonder, if you slow down, think more, and think deeper, whether you'll pick up on what several of them noticed by the end of the evening.**

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE — THE FELLOWSHIP PROJECT

THE BUILDING OF FELLOWSHIP

STONE'S TABLE #20
Thursday, October 15, 2026

SLOW DOWN. THINK MORE. THINK DEEPER.

The Wisdom to Discover What You Haven't Yet Considered

OPENING SCRIPTURE — PROVERBS 1:5–7 (NIV)

"Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—"

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction."

I want to begin tonight by looking at what Proverbs is teaching us.

Verse 7 tells us where knowledge begins: with the fear of the Lord.

That doesn't mean simply being afraid of God.

It means having reverence for Him—recognizing His authority, respecting His wisdom, and understanding that we don't have all the answers ourselves.

And then we look at verses 5 and 6.

They tell us that even those who are already wise should continue listening, learning, and seeking guidance.

Being wise doesn't mean you've finished learning.

And having faith doesn't mean you've finished asking questions.

That's what I want to talk about tonight.

Slowing down long enough to think about our lives.

Not because we're necessarily doing something wrong.

Not because we need to change who we are.

But because there are things about ourselves, the people around us, and our relationship with God that we may never discover unless we take the time to ask questions.

PART ONE — WHAT I WISH I'D KNOWN AT TWENTY-ONE

When I was around your age, I was busy living.

I worked as a valve technician, repairing equipment used in water treatment facilities and nuclear plants. After my regular workday, I'd often climb into a tow truck and work well into the night.

I went to vocational school. I rode motorcycles. I spent time with my friends at Tracy's Tavern, drinking beer, playing darts, and having a good time.

And I wouldn't trade those memories.

But looking back, there's something I wish we'd done more often.

I wish we'd talked about more than what happened the night before or what we were planning for the weekend.

I wish we'd asked each other questions about faith, purpose, relationships, and what kind of men we wanted to become.

Not because we needed all the answers.

But because those conversations might have helped us discover things about ourselves and one another that we hadn't yet considered.

QUESTION FOR THE TABLE

Think about the conversations you have with your friends today. Are there things you'd genuinely like to know about them but have never thought to ask?

Optional follow-up: What's something you wish people were more comfortable talking about?

PART TWO — THE PEOPLE WE THINK WE KNOW

Years ago, before Angela and I moved to Oswego, I had a neighbor named Dave Seper. We called him Sparky.

Sparky was an electrician and a retired airline pilot, about thirteen years older than me.

We lived next to each other for about five years. I spent countless hours in his garage talking about cars, electrical work, our careers, and life in general.

When I moved away in 2000, we didn't see each other nearly as often, but we continued talking regularly on the phone.

Our friendship continued, even though our time together changed.

After Stone passed away, Sparky and I had a conversation about faith.

I learned things about his relationship with God and the faith he shared with his late wife, Jen, that I hadn't known throughout all those years of friendship.

And it made me wonder:

How could I have known someone for so long without ever asking about something so important to him?

I don't regret the time we spent together.

I simply recognize that our friendship had another dimension we could have explored.

And I wonder how many other people in my life have stories, beliefs, or experiences I've never thought to ask about.

QUESTION FOR THE TABLE

Do you think it's possible to know somebody for years and still not really understand what matters most to them?

Optional follow-up: What keeps us from asking those deeper questions?

PART THREE — WISDOM DOESN'T COME WITH AGE ALONE

Lately, I've been spending time studying Proverbs.

And something interesting has happened.

I'm not just finding answers.

I'm discovering questions about myself that I never thought to ask.

One of those questions came from Proverbs 15:1.

SCRIPTURE — PROVERBS 15:1 (NIV)

"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

That verse made me examine how I sometimes communicate with Angela.

There are moments when I become frustrated because I don't feel understood.

And when that happens, my words aren't always as gentle as they should be.

I have work to do.

But here's what I've been learning.

When I feel that frustration building, I can pause.

I can give myself a moment to settle down.

I can consider her perspective before deciding how to respond.

And I can choose my words more carefully.

I don't always get it right.

But I'm becoming more aware of those moments.

And that awareness gives me an opportunity to do something differently.

Here's what I want you to understand:

Wisdom doesn't automatically come with age.

I'm nearly fifty years old, and I'm still learning things about myself.

The wisdom isn't simply in how many years I've lived.

The wisdom is in my willingness to keep learning.

And Proverbs reminds me that this willingness should begin with something greater than myself:

A reverence for God and a desire to understand His wisdom.

QUESTION FOR THE TABLE

Do you believe wisdom comes naturally with age, or does it depend more on someone's willingness to learn?

Optional follow-up: Can someone who's twenty demonstrate more wisdom in a particular situation than someone who's fifty?

PART FOUR — SLOW DOWN. THINK MORE. THINK DEEPER.

I've watched many of you grow up together.

I've watched the friendships you've shared with Stone and Steel.

I've watched you work, have fun, make memories, and begin figuring out what you want from life.

And that's what young men your age should be doing.

Living. Learning. Discovering.

Then May 9 happened.

And suddenly, all of us were confronted with questions we never expected to face.

Questions about life.

Questions about death.

Questions about faith.

Questions about what really matters.

I wish none of us had been forced to confront those questions in this way.

But I also believe there's something important we can learn from the experience.

We shouldn't have to wait for something terrible to happen before we begin thinking deeply about our lives.

And that brings me to tonight's message.

SLOW DOWN.

Not because life needs to stop.

Not because you shouldn't enjoy yourselves.

But because sometimes we become so busy living that we forget to reflect on the life we're living.

THINK MORE.

Ask questions.

About your friendships.

About your faith.

About your future.

About what you believe and why you believe it.

Be curious about things you've never considered before.

THINK DEEPER.

Don't always stop at the first answer.

Ask yourself why something matters.

Consider another person's perspective.

Be willing to discover that something you believed might deserve another look.

And recognize that you don't have to figure everything out today.

This isn't about finding something wrong with yourself.

It's about discovering something you didn't know was there.

QUESTION FOR THE TABLE

Has anything you've experienced over the past several months caused you to think differently about your own life?

Optional follow-up: Do you think we sometimes avoid meaningful questions because we're afraid we won't know the answers?

No one needs to share anything they're uncomfortable discussing.

CLOSING — AN INVITATION TO DISCOVER

Tonight, I'm going to ask something of each of you.

Not something difficult.

And not something you need to share with anyone.

Sometime between now and next Thursday, I want you to find fifteen minutes.

Put your phone down.

Find somewhere quiet.

And think about one meaningful question concerning your life.

Maybe it's about your future.

Maybe it's about a friendship.

Maybe it's about your faith.

Maybe it's about something you've always believed but never really examined.

You don't have to find an answer.

You don't have to discover something you need to change.

And you certainly don't have to come back next week with some great revelation.

I simply want you to give yourself the opportunity to discover something.

Next Thursday, we'll gather for our twenty-first Stone's Table.

And if anyone wants to share what they thought about, what they questioned, or what they discovered, we'll make room for that conversation.

No pressure.

No judgment.

Just an opportunity to learn from one another.

Because that's part of what we're building here.

A fellowship where wisdom can be received, lived, and shared.

CLOSING SCRIPTURE — JEREMIAH 29:13 (NIV)

"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

I believe that when we become willing to ask meaningful questions, we open ourselves to discovering things we might otherwise have missed.

About ourselves.

About one another.

And about God.

CLOSE W/ PRAYER...

THE STONE — #20

SLOW DOWN. THINK MORE. THINK DEEPER.

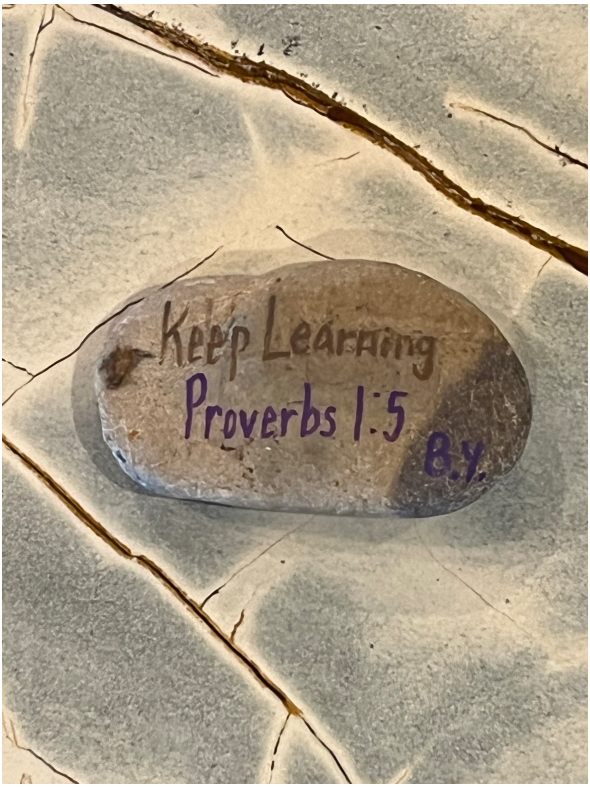
Opening Scripture: Proverbs 1:5–7 (NIV)
Supporting Scripture: Proverbs 15:1 (NIV)
Closing Scripture: Jeremiah 29:13 (NIV)

THE LESSON

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." — Proverbs 1:7

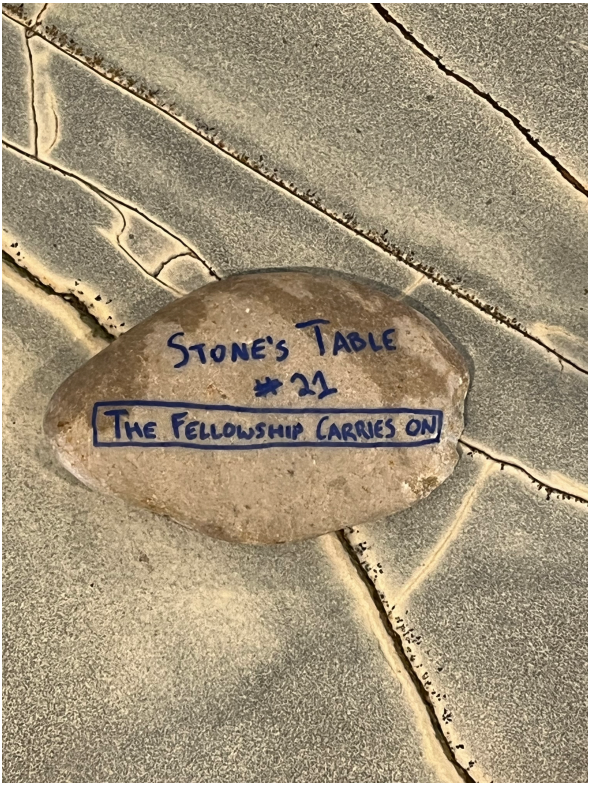
Wisdom grows when we remain willing to listen, learn, and seek God's guidance.

LESSON 20



LESSON 21

The Fellowship Carries On



THE REFLECTION

The Significance of Twenty-One

Twenty-one.

It's a number that has carried significance in our family for as long as I can remember.

Steel was born on March 21, 2004. Twenty months later, Stone arrived on November 21, 2005.

Both of my boys were born on the twenty-first.

Angela has a video of the three of us boys sitting at the bar in our basement. Steel was around five, Stone around three, and there we were, raising shot glasses filled with water and doing **bottoms up**.

I remember that evening. I even marked it on the calendar in my phone, looking ahead to the days when we would celebrate their twenty-first birthdays.

Their **golden birthdays**.

We were fortunate enough to celebrate Steel's golden birthday—his twenty-first—with family and friends in March 2025.

And we were looking forward to doing the same for Stoney on November 21, 2026.

I remember how much I anticipated turning twenty-one myself. It's one of those milestones a young man looks forward to. And as a father, I was just as excited to share that experience with my sons.

But there was something more important to me than the celebration itself.

I had always looked forward to knowing my boys as young men.

Angela and I had spent their childhood raising them, guiding them, correcting them, and doing our best to prepare them for adulthood.

But we had also worked to preserve something along the way.

Our friendship with them.

I wanted to reach that stage of life where we could sit together, enjoy one another's company, share experiences, and appreciate the relationships we had spent so many years building.

And we had reached it.

We weren't waiting for that relationship to begin. We were already enjoying it.

That's part of what makes Stone's twenty-first birthday so difficult to think about.

We had made it to the years I had always looked forward to, only to have the future I imagined with him taken away.

And now, as November 21 approaches, I'm preparing to recognize his twenty-first birthday in a way I never could have imagined.

Twenty-one lessons.

Twenty-one gatherings built around the friendships he helped create.

When I first brought these young men together in June, I had already committed to opening our home every Thursday.

I didn't set out to complete twenty-one lessons and call it an accomplishment. **I wanted the fellowship to continue, regardless of how many Thursdays came and went.**

But early on, I began imagining something more.

I wanted to write a book that would preserve what we were building together, and I hoped to have it completed and printed in time for Stone's twenty-first birthday.

As I looked ahead to November 21, I realized those Thursday gatherings would give us twenty-one lessons to carry into its pages.

Twenty-one lessons for Stone's twenty-first birthday.

The number that had meant so much to our family was finding its way into something I never could have imagined creating.

And now, having reached our twenty-first gathering, I find myself looking back at what we've accomplished together.

It's an accomplishment I'm proud of.

And it's one that carries an enormous amount of sadness.

A Gift I Never Imagined Giving

What the boys didn't know was just how much I hoped to place this book into their hands on Stone's twenty-first birthday.

Not simply to collect the lessons, but to preserve the experiences surrounding them. The conversations, the friendships, the laughter, the difficult evenings, and the things we were learning about ourselves and one another.

I wanted there to be something these young men could return to long after our Thursday evenings had passed.

Something they could hold in their hands.

Something they could put on a shelf, take down years from now, and remember what we were building together.

And somewhere along the way, that hope became something I was determined to pursue.

I wanted this book to be a gift to the young men Stone loved.

I don't know whether I can adequately explain what that means to me.

For years, Angela and I had looked forward to celebrating Stone's twenty-first golden birthday with him.

I imagined the kind of birthday a young man remembers. Being surrounded by his family and friends, enjoying the freedom and excitement that come with turning twenty-one.

We had already experienced that joy with Steel.

And I wanted it for Stone.

I still do.

But I can't give my boy the birthday we had planned.

I can't raise a glass **with** him or watch him celebrate another year of his life.

And there's no gift I could ever give somebody else that would make that absence any easier.

But I can still give something in his honor.

I can give the young men he loved a piece of what his life helped create.

A record of the friendships he built, the people he brought into our lives, and the fellowship that continues because those relationships mattered.

That's what I hope this book becomes.

Not just twenty-one lessons.

Not simply a collection of things I've written.

Something of Stone that his friends can carry with them.

And if you're one of those young men reading these words, holding this book in your hands, then there's something I want you to know.

I wrote it with you in mind.

Every one of you.

Because you were part of Stone's life.

And because, in ways you may not fully recognize, you've become an important part of mine.

I couldn't celebrate Stone's twenty-first birthday with him as we'd always imagined. But I could honor that day by giving something to the people he loved.

And I hope that, whenever you return to these pages, you'll find a little of him waiting here.

What Twenty-One Lessons Taught Me

Looking back on these twenty-one gatherings, I realize something I hadn't fully understood when I began.

I wasn't the only one doing the teaching.

I had started Stone's Table hoping to offer these young men a little guidance, a place to gather, and an opportunity to continue the friendships they had built with Stone.

But somewhere along the way, they began teaching me something about myself.

Every Thursday, they gave me an opportunity to try something I wasn't entirely comfortable doing.

They listened when I struggled to find my words. They participated when I asked questions. And they kept **showing up,** even on the evenings when I wondered whether I had managed to communicate everything I wanted to say.

Their encouragement gave me the confidence to continue.

And in many ways, that reminded me of a dear friend who taught me many things in life, but one experience in particular was worth sharing.

He had recognized something in me years earlier that I hadn't fully recognized in myself.

He gave me an opportunity to discover what I was capable of doing.

And when I needed him, he was there to help.

I hadn't thought about that experience in quite some time.

But as I prepared this twenty-first lesson, I began recognizing how much that friendship had influenced the man I had become.

Sometimes the greatest thing we can offer somebody isn't an answer. It's an opportunity.

An opportunity to learn.

An opportunity to contribute.

An opportunity to discover something about themselves they might never have recognized otherwise.

And perhaps that's what I hope Stone's Table continues to become.

Not simply a place where I prepare a lesson, these young men listen, and everybody enjoys one of my **gourmet dinners**—although I suspect the food had something to do with why they kept coming back. **For**

some, it might even explain their perfect attendance! 😜

But a place where we all have something to contribute, where we can learn from one another, and where nobody has to have everything figured out before they're willing to participate.

I remember something I wrote back in our fifth lesson.

I described myself as a runner at the starting line.

I had finally recognized my calling and purpose in gathering these young men together.

I dug my feet in, and I got ready to push off the line.

At the time, I didn't know where that race would take me.

I only knew I was ready to begin.

And now, twenty-one lessons later, I find myself looking back at how far we've come.

The conversations we've shared.

The friendships we've strengthened.

The things we've learned about ourselves and one another.

Twenty-one lessons had become a meaningful milestone along the way.

But it was never the finish line.

If anything, reaching this milestone has reminded me why I wanted to begin in the first place.

I didn't start Stone's Table to see how many lessons I could write.

I started it because I wanted these young men to have somewhere they belonged.

Somewhere they could continue the friendships Stone helped create.

And somewhere we could keep learning from one another.

Just as I hope this book gives them something they can return to, I hope the fellowship gives them something they can continue building long after these first twenty-one lessons.

Because the friendships Stone helped create didn't end with his life.

They brought us to this Table.

And what we choose to do with them from here is something we're still discovering together.

But there's something else I've come to understand.

Not everyone who finds their way to Stone's Table will have walked through our front door.

Some of you reading this book have sat beside me on Thursday evenings. You've shared the meals, the laughter, the conversations, and the occasional uncomfortable silence when I asked a question nobody was quite ready to answer.

Others may have known Stone all his life.

And some of you may never have met him at all.

Yet here you are.

Twenty-one lessons later, you've found your way to the same Table.

You've listened to our conversations, considered the questions we've asked, and perhaps recognized something of your own life in the experiences we've shared.

And if you have, then I hope you understand something.

You don't have to know Stone to recognize the value of what his life helped bring together.

You don't have to have been sitting in one of those chairs to carry something meaningful away from these gatherings.

And you certainly don't need an invitation from me to take what you've learned and share it with somebody else.

Because fellowship was never intended to stop at our front door.

It begins wherever someone is willing to listen, to encourage, to offer a hand, or simply to make room for another person.

Perhaps that's the greatest lesson I've learned through all of this.

A Table isn't defined by the number of chairs surrounding it. It's defined by our willingness to make room for one more.

So whether you've been here every Thursday or you've only come to know us through these pages, I hope you'll approach this final lesson with the same curiosity and openness I've asked of the boys.

There's still something worth learning.

Something worth sharing.

And perhaps something worth carrying into your own life.

Twenty-one lessons.

A fellowship still growing.

And now, there's a place for you at the Table, too.

Welcome to our twenty-first lesson.

THE ORIGINAL LESSON

STONE'S TABLE — THE FELLOWSHIP PROJECT

STONE'S TABLE #21

THE FELLOWSHIP CARRIES ON

Thursday, October 22, 2026

Twenty-One Lessons. A Fellowship Still Growing.

OPENING SCRIPTURE

Romans 12:10 (NIV)

"Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves."

PART ONE — TWENTY-ONE LESSONS

WHAT WE'VE BEEN BUILDING

Tonight marks our twenty-first lesson at Stone's Table.

When I first began putting these gatherings together back in June, I had a goal of sharing twenty-one lessons before Stone's twenty-first birthday on November 21.

Twenty-one lessons for twenty-one years.

And here we are.

But I want to make something clear right from the beginning.

Twenty-one lessons was a goal. It was never meant to be an ending.

I didn't start Stone's Table because I wanted to become a teacher.

I started it because I wanted to keep you guys connected.

I wanted to provide a place where you could continue the friendships you had built with Stone, with Steel, and with one another.

Somewhere you could come on a Thursday evening, share a meal, laugh, tell stories, and talk about whatever life was putting in front of you.

And somewhere along the way, those conversations began turning into lessons.

Twenty-one of them.

Some were easier for me to deliver than others.

Some evenings I felt comfortable talking with you.

Other evenings I struggled to organize my thoughts, stay on course, or find the words I wanted to say.

And I know some of those lessons got pretty long.

But you guys kept showing up.

You listened.

You participated.

You offered your thoughts.

And when I asked whether you were finding value in the lessons I sent out each Thursday, every one of you who responded encouraged me to keep doing it.

I want you to understand something about that.

You guys have been helping me learn how to do this.

Your willingness to listen gave me the confidence to keep trying.

And I've learned something along the way.

You don't have to be completely comfortable doing something for it to be worth doing.

Sometimes you just need a reason to begin.

And sometimes you need people around you who are willing to give you an opportunity to discover what you're capable of.

QUESTION FOR THE TABLE

Can you remember a time when you weren't entirely comfortable doing something, but somebody encouraged you to give it a try?

What happened when you did?

PART TWO — SOMEBODY SAW SOMETHING IN ME

THE STORY OF STEVE STROUSE

I want to tell you guys a story about a friend of mine named Steve Strouse.

When I was around twenty-five or twenty-six, just around the time Steel was born, I was working in the steel truss industry.

I was selling trusses and wall panels, and I had begun getting serious about developing my skills in CAD and design.

I had plenty of hands-on experience.

I'd built trusses, worked in the plant, installed products, and learned how to solve problems in the field.

I also had my own young construction company on the side, American Finishers, and I shared work back and forth between that business and my paying job at Custom Components.

But I didn't have a college degree.

Steve was about twenty years older than me.

He was an engineer by trade, with years of experience as a builder, contractor, and framer.

He was also a natural when it came to talking with people.

Steve represented one of the companies we purchased materials from, and part of his job involved visiting architectural and engineering firms.

He would arrange what were called **AIA presentations**.

He'd bring boxed lunches into an office and spend an hour or so teaching architects and engineers about steel trusses, structural design, and the engineering behind the products.

The people attending could earn continuing education credits toward maintaining their professional licenses.

Steve started inviting me to come along.

At first, my job was pretty simple.

Help carry in the lunches.

Help set everything up.

Sit beside him while he gave his presentation.

And listen.

I did that for years.

And I remember looking around those rooms at all these educated men and women, some fresh out of college and others who had spent their careers designing buildings.

They had their ties, their pocket protectors, and their professional credentials.

And I'd sometimes sit there wondering:

What am I doing in this room?

I didn't have the education they had.

What did I really have to offer?

THE DAY STEVE DECIDED I WAS READY

Well, about four years into doing these presentations with Steve, we were driving to a particularly reputable architectural firm.

We were about fifteen minutes away.

And Steve looked over at me and said:

"You think you could carry the conversation today?"

I looked at him and laughed.

"Are you serious?"

He told me I knew the product, understood the field, and had experience many of the people in those rooms didn't have.

He reminded me that I'd built trusses, installed them, designed them, and worked through problems in the field.

Then he asked:

"Why wouldn't you be qualified?"

I didn't have much of an answer.

But I remember my mind beginning to race.

We pulled up to the office, got out of the car, and started grabbing the boxed lunches.

And I asked him again.

"Steve, are you really being serious, or are you just pulling my leg?"

He looked at me and laughed.

"No, I'm just f#@king with you. Let's get inside."

Well, that was a relief.

Until everybody sat down.

STEVE HANDS ME THE REMOTE

Steve began introducing himself to the room.

He talked a little about his background and experience.

Then he introduced me.

And I remember feeling pretty honored listening to everything he was saying.

He talked about my experience building trusses, running a truss plant, designing wall panel equipment, and even owning my own construction company installing those products.

I'm sitting there looking out at all these men and women in their ties and professional clothes, some with pocket protectors in their shirt pockets.

And I'm thinking, **Steve, you're making me sound pretty damn impressive.**

Then he looked over at me and said:

"Ted, you've got the floor."

He sat down and pushed the PowerPoint remote across the table.

I looked at him with a smile.

All I could think was:

You son of a bitch.

Remember, this was the same man who, fifteen minutes earlier, had assured me he was only messing with me!

So I picked up the remote, stood up, and said something along the lines of:

"Well, there's really no reason for me to introduce myself any further. That was a much nicer introduction than I probably would've given myself. So without further ado, let's get into this."

And somehow, I started talking.

I went through the slides.

We talked about the engineering, the connections, the loads, and all the technical details.

Live loads, dead loads, wind loads, uplift values.

All the analytical stuff these architects and engineers loved getting into.

And I remember wondering where in the hell all this information was coming from.

But it was coming out of me.

I'd spent years learning it.

I just hadn't realized how much of it I actually knew.

THE PART I WAS REALLY WORRIED ABOUT

As I got closer to the final slides, I started feeling nervous again.

Because I knew something about Steve's presentations.

The real meat of the conversation wasn't always in the PowerPoint.

It was in the questions afterward.

And those questions could go on for forty-five minutes or longer.

When I finished the slides, I opened the floor.

And nobody said anything.

It was quiet.

Really quiet.

And I remember thinking:

Oh, crap. I must've really stumbled through that.

Part of me was relieved.

I thought, *Well, maybe we'll just pack everything up and get out of here.*

Then a woman raised her hand.

She asked a question.

I answered it.

Then a young architect raised his hand.

I remember him because he looked fresh out of school, and he was wearing a tie that didn't match his shirt.

He asked a question.

I answered that one too.

And I started thinking:

This isn't all that bad.

Then an older gentleman sitting somewhere toward the middle of the room spoke up.

He made a comment before asking his question.

And I could tell immediately that this guy had been around the profession for a long time.

He knew what he was talking about.

I started answering him, but somewhere along the way, I got a little tongue-tied.

I looked over at Steve.

And I said something like:

"Steve, maybe you can help me put this into some clearer words for this gentleman."

And Steve stood up.

He helped explain what I was trying to say and carried the conversation forward.

He didn't leave me hanging.

THE HANDSHAKE THAT FOLLOWED

When the presentation ended, people began thanking us and heading back to their workday.

But that older gentleman came over to talk with Steve.

They had a pretty lengthy conversation.

And I could tell we'd accomplished what we'd come there to do.

He had unrolled a set of plans.

The gentleman was interested in incorporating our truss product into the specifications for a project his firm was designing.

He asked Steve for his phone number.

And Steve said something along the lines of:

"Let's get you Ted's number. You can work directly with him on this project."

That gentleman looked over at me.

He told me I'd delivered the presentation very well and that he looked forward to working with me.

And I remember what that meant to me.

The same man whose question had made me nervous was now asking to work with me.

THE RIDE HOME

When Steve and I got back into the car, I still had adrenaline running through me.

Steve had been going through one of his attempts to quit smoking.

He'd switched over to chewing tobacco for a while.

So he reached for his Copenhagen and offered me some.

I took a pinch.

And there we were, driving home, enjoying a chew together.

Steve looked over and said:

"You did great."

I looked at him and said:

"I can't believe you did that to me."

And somewhere during that ride home, Steve mentioned something else.

Remember that older gentleman who'd asked me the question I struggled with?

Turns out, he owned the damn firm.

I had no idea.

Here I was, worried that I didn't belong in a room full of architects and engineers, and the man who owned the place had just complimented my presentation and asked to work with me.

And Steve told me something I've never forgotten.

"Sometimes you just need a nudge to find out what you're capable of doing. And now you know."

That was Steve.

He didn't make a big speech about believing in me.

He didn't announce that he was mentoring me.

He just gave me an opportunity.

And when I needed him, **he was right there beside me.**

From that day forward, Steve and I began alternating presentations.

We became a pretty good team.

And we had a lot of fun doing it.

I always looked forward to visiting another firm with Steve.

But here's something else.

Steve never announced that he was mentoring me.

He wasn't that kind of guy.

It was years later that I recognized what he'd been doing.

He was preparing me for an opportunity before I even knew I was ready for it.

And our friendship continued long after those presentations.

Angela and I even took Steel and Stone down to Missouri to spend a week with Steve.

We camped, we fished and spent time at his shooting range, and simply enjoyed being together.

The boys got to know him.

And I believe they'll always remember him as a good friend.

WHAT STEVE TAUGHT ME

I tell you that story because I want you guys to understand something.

Everybody sitting around this Table has something valuable to contribute.

You may not recognize it in yourself yet.

You might not be comfortable speaking in front of other people.

You might think somebody else knows more than you do.

But that doesn't mean you have nothing worth sharing.

Steve saw something in me that I hadn't fully recognized.

And he gave me an opportunity to discover it.

I want to offer you guys that same opportunity.

Andrew suggested that others should have the chance to prepare or lead a lesson.

I think that's a great idea.

We've already seen Andrew do it when Angela and I were in Mexico.

And I want you guys to know that the opportunity is open to all of you.

If you have an idea, bring it.

If you want to help develop a lesson, I'll help you.

If you want to lead the conversation, we'll support you.

And if you'd rather share your thoughts with me and have me deliver them, I'll gladly do that too.

We will still have a meaningful lesson every Thursday.

But those lessons don't always have to come from me.

And just as Steve was there when I needed help answering a question, I'll be here to help you.

You don't have to know everything before you have something worth contributing.

QUESTION FOR THE TABLE

Has somebody ever recognized an ability in you before you recognized it yourself?

And have you ever done that for somebody else?

PART THREE — LEARNING TOGETHER

WHY I'VE BEEN TURNING TO SCRIPTURE

There's something else I want to share about how these lessons have developed.

For twenty-one weeks, I've generally begun with something happening in life.

Sometimes it was something one of you was experiencing.

Sometimes it was something I was struggling with.

Sometimes it was a conversation, a question, or simply a thought that stayed with me.

We began with life.

And then I would look to scripture to see what guidance or wisdom might help us explore that subject.

You guys may have noticed that I typically include two scriptures.

One at the beginning.

And one toward the end.

There's a reason for that.

I wanted God's Word to help guide our conversations and give us something to reflect upon.

But there's something you might not know about me.

For most of my life, I didn't enjoy reading the Bible.

I found it overwhelming.

Sometimes confusing.

And, quite frankly, boring.

There were so many names, places, generations, and historical details that I struggled to follow.

It wasn't something I naturally wanted to spend my time doing.

But as Stone's Table began developing, I started thinking about the responsibility I was taking on.

You guys were giving me your Thursday evenings.

You were listening to my thoughts.

And I was talking about subjects that can have a real impact on the decisions we make and the people we become.

I didn't want to mislead anybody.

I didn't want to simply tell stories and assume that my experiences were enough to guide somebody else's life.

I wanted some guardrails.

Something I could measure my thoughts against.

Something that might challenge me when my understanding was incomplete.

And what better place to begin looking than the Bible?

So I started studying.

At first, I committed to about fifteen minutes.

But something unexpected happened.

The more I began reading, the more questions I had.

And the more questions I had, the more I wanted to understand.

Those fifteen minutes began turning into forty-five minutes.

Sometimes an hour or more.

Something I once found boring had become something I genuinely wanted to explore.

And it reminded me of something I've believed for a long time.

If you're not interested in something, it's difficult to learn about it.

But sometimes you have to step outside your existing interests to discover what you've been missing.

You might find something worth knowing that you never would have discovered otherwise.

Some people recognize the value of studying scripture much earlier in life.

Micah, for example, has spent time learning the Bible and probably understands a great deal more of it than I do.

And I appreciate that.

Because **wisdom isn't determined by how old you are.**

I'm still learning.

And I hope I never stop.

AN INVITATION TO EXPLORE

I know some people aren't particularly interested in religion.

I can appreciate that.

But I would encourage you not to let that prevent you from exploring the Bible.

Don't become so overwhelmed trying to remember every name or trace every generation that you miss the story being told.

Ask questions.

Look at the history.

Consider who was speaking, who they were speaking to, and what they were trying to communicate.

Then think about how that might relate to your own life.

You don't have to understand everything the first time you read it.

I certainly don't.

And you don't have to pretend you know something you don't.

That's part of what I'd like us to continue doing here.

When you bring an idea for a Thursday lesson, it doesn't need to begin with a Bible verse.

It can begin with something happening in your life.

A question about friendship.

A decision you're trying to make.

Something you're curious about.

Something you've experienced that changed the way you think.

Let's begin with life, and then explore what scripture might teach us about it.

We can investigate it together.

And if we don't understand something, we can figure out where to look for answers.

I wish I'd begun doing more of that when I was your age.

But I've also learned that **it's never too late to begin.**

And the sooner you begin exploring something worthwhile, the more understanding you may carry with you through the years ahead.

QUESTION FOR THE TABLE

Is there something you've always dismissed as boring, difficult, or uninteresting, but later discovered there was more to it than you expected?

What changed your mind?

PART FOUR — THE FELLOWSHIP CARRIES ON

There's something else I want us to consider as we talk about where Stone's Table goes from here.

I don't want us to limit our reach.

Think back to Stone's celebration of life.

Think about the hundreds of people who came to honor him.

People from different parts of his life, different generations, different friendships.

Stone and Steel have always had an incredible reach when it comes to the friendships they've built.

And I've watched that throughout their lives.

I believe Stone would have continued building those relationships, just as I know Steel will, and just as every one of you will as you move through life.

So I don't want us to think that Stone's Table should be limited to the people who are already here.

There's always room to extend an invitation.

SOMETIMES AN INVITATION IS ALL IT TAKES

Last night, Steel shared something with Angela, Kaitlyn, and me.

He remembered a day when he and Stone were shopping at the mall.

They ran into somebody Steel knew but hadn't seen in quite some time.

And during their conversation, that person invited him to come check out his church.

Steel remembered thinking that was pretty cool.

And I remember Stone telling me about a similar invitation, although I don't know whether it was the same conversation.

But what struck me was that **the invitation itself meant something to them.**

Somebody thought enough of them to reach out and include them.

And I want you guys to think about that.

You never know what an invitation might mean to somebody.

It might be exactly what that person needed that day.

Not because you have all the answers.

Not because you're trying to change their life.

But simply because **you made them feel welcome.**

TWO STRANGERS AT A CONCERT

I want to share another experience with you.

Back in June, when Angela, Steel, Kaitlyn, and I attended a veterans tribute concert, I noticed a man in the crowd wearing a sweatshirt.

It said something along the lines of:

"If you need a prayer, or just a hand on your shoulder, ask me."

I didn't know this man.

I'd never met him before.

But something about that sweatshirt caught my attention.

So I walked over and tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned around, wondering what I wanted.

He wasn't some polished-looking individual. He surely didn't look like he stood behind a pulpit every Sunday.

Just a regular dude with a beard, a pair of blue jeans, and a set of tradesman work boots.

They weren't for evening wear. They were worn in, so I knew he was cut from the same cloth as me.

And I said something like, **"Your sweatshirt caught me. I'll take you up on that."**

I didn't tell him my story.

I didn't explain what had happened to Stone.

I didn't break down or share everything I was feeling.

I simply accepted the invitation he'd offered to anyone who might need it.

And you know what he did?

He set his beer down on the ground.

He put his arm around my shoulders.

And right there, in the middle of a crowd of people enjoying a concert, he bowed his head with me and said a wonderful prayer.

There was no pressure.

There was no awkwardness.

Just two guys who had stepped aside for a moment to share something meaningful.

When he finished, he gave me a quick hug and a handshake.

He picked his beer back up.

And we both went back to enjoying the music.

I never spoke to that man again.

But I'll tell you something.

I'll never forget him.

That was one of the coolest experiences I've had in my life.

And it reminded me that fellowship doesn't always require years of friendship.

Sometimes it begins with a simple invitation.

Sometimes it lasts only a few minutes.

But the impact can stay with somebody for a lifetime.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR OUR TABLE?

I'm not suggesting we need to turn Thursday nights into some enormous gathering.

I love what we've created here.

I love that you guys can come over, eat dinner, laugh, have a few beers or root beers and Dr Peppers, and talk about life.

I don't want to lose any of that.

But I also don't want us to close the door on the friendships we haven't made yet.

If there's somebody you know who might enjoy what we're doing here, invite him.

Let him come sit with us.

Let him share a meal.

Let him experience what Stone's Table has become.

Because we're not simply looking back at the friendships Stone helped create.

We're continuing to build upon them, while opening the door to friendships that haven't even begun.

And I believe that's something Stone would have appreciated.

QUESTION FOR THE TABLE

Can you remember a time when somebody made you feel included or welcomed, even though they didn't really know you?

Optional follow-up: Have you ever extended an invitation to somebody without realizing how much it might have meant to them?

THE THOUGHT I WANT YOU TO CARRY

Never underestimate the value of making somebody feel welcome.

You don't have to know their story.

You don't have to know what they're carrying.

And you don't have to know whether they'll accept your invitation.

Sometimes all you have to do is extend it.

You might be the person somebody needed to meet that day.

CLOSING SCRIPTURE

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 (NIV)

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor:

If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up."

BEFORE WE CLOSE — REMEMBERING KENNY

Before we close tonight, there's one more person I want to take a moment to recognize.

Kenny.

I know this has been a particularly difficult week for some of us, especially Steel and Jake.

Kenny wasn't just somebody they worked alongside. He was a **friend, a mentor, and a man who genuinely cared about them.**

And he shared that same friendship with Stone.

Kenny was an older guy who had lived a lot of life. He'd experienced his share of hardships, but he had a heart for these boys.

He loved Stone, Steel, and Jake.

I know that personally because Kenny and I had conversations about them. I knew how much they meant to him.

And I know how much he meant to them.

There's something about friendship that I think we sometimes overlook.

It doesn't have an age requirement.

Sometimes the people who become important in our lives aren't always the people we grew up with.

Sometimes they're the people we work beside, the people who teach us something, the people who listen, or the people who simply take an interest in who we're becoming.

Kenny was one of those men.

And I want Steel and Jake to know that **the friendship they shared with Kenny mattered.**

Just as the friendship Stone shared with him mattered.

We don't need to turn tonight into another evening of sadness.

But I don't want us to overlook the people who have helped shape our lives, either.

Kenny was one of those people.

And tonight, I want to thank God for the time these boys had with him.

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for bringing us together tonight.

Thank You for twenty-one gatherings, for the friendships that brought us here, and for the opportunity to continue building upon what Stone helped create.

As we move forward, give us the wisdom to listen, the curiosity to keep learning, and the courage to ask questions about the things we don't understand.

Help us recognize the value of the people You've placed in our lives.

And tonight, Lord, I especially want to thank You for **Kenny**.

Thank You for the friendship he shared with Stone, Steel, and Jake.

Thank You for the years they worked together, the conversations they shared, the things he taught them, and the care he had for each of them.

Please bring comfort to those who loved him and are missing him tonight.

And help us remember that the love and kindness we receive from others are gifts worth carrying forward.

Father, thank You for Stone.

Thank You for the friendships he helped create and for the opportunity You've given us to continue gathering around this Table.

Help us protect those friendships.

Help us continue showing up for one another.

And as we begin this next chapter, remind us that **we don't have to have all the answers to keep learning together.**

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

LESSON 21


REMEMBER · KENNY · KEEP SHOWING UP · GROW THROUGH DISCOMFORT · TURN TO SCRIPTURE ·
"BE DEVOTED TO ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE. HONOR ONE ANOTHER ABOVE YOURSELVES."
ROMANS 12:10
M.M.

THE SILVER LINING

When I first began gathering these young men, I believed I had something worth sharing. Nearly fifty years of living had given me experiences, lessons, mistakes, and a little wisdom that I hoped might be useful to them. I wanted to offer something that could help them navigate their own lives, perhaps recognize a mistake before making it, or consider a perspective they hadn't encountered before.

What I didn't anticipate was how much I would learn from them.

I've come to understand that sharing wisdom doesn't necessarily mean someone is ready to receive it. These young men have lives of their own, parents who have raised them, and experiences still waiting to shape who they become. Their world is different from the one I grew up in. I can offer my perspective, but I cannot expect them to make it their own.

And sometimes, the young man receiving that perspective may not be ready for it. That's his experience to have, too.

Perhaps that's one of the more important lessons I've learned through this fellowship. Wisdom isn't simply knowing what to say. Sometimes it's knowing when to listen, when to offer a thought, and when to allow someone the opportunity to discover something for himself.

I began writing these lessons because I wanted to preserve the conversations we shared, the reasons they came about, and the experiences that brought

them to the Table. I wanted the boys to have something they could return to years from now. Something that might carry an entirely different meaning when they're thirty than it did when they were twenty.

But somewhere along the way, I began recognizing another part of what was happening.

Every Thursday, I was preparing more than a lesson. I was preparing dinner. Some evenings that meant spending hours smoking meat or putting together a meal for fifteen or twenty people. Other nights it was pizza, fried chicken, or something one of the boys had decided to prepare himself.

We had brisket and pork butt, Montana Sunrise Chicken, Italian dinners, tacos, burgers, sausage, lasagna, and a whole lot of chili. There were nights when the boys brought their own meat for the grill, nights when they took over the cooking, and evenings when Angela helped make sure everybody was fed.

And throughout it all, I found myself taking photographs.

Usually from about the same place, watching the boys gather and line up to fill their plates. At the time, I wasn't thinking about what those photographs might someday represent. I was simply capturing another Thursday evening at our house.

Now, looking back, I realize those photographs tell a story of their own.

They show the fellowship taking place outside the lessons. The conversations happening while somebody waited for his food. The laughter, the familiar faces, the occasional new face, and the simple comfort of knowing there would be another opportunity to gather the following week.

I remember returning home from Mexico in October and how good it felt to be back with the boys. Nothing extraordinary had to happen that evening. I was simply glad to be home, sitting among them again.

That realization has stayed with me.

I originally brought these young men together because I believed they needed fellowship. **Somewhere along the way, I discovered how much I needed it myself.**

There is something difficult about recognizing goodness in a life that has been changed by something so painful. I would give anything to have my boy back. But I cannot change the fact that we have lost Stone, and I refuse to believe that means nothing meaningful can come from what we choose to do next.

If something shared around this Table helps one young man make a better decision, recognize that he isn't alone, or find the courage to ask for help when he needs it, then this fellowship has served a purpose beyond anything I could have imagined when we first gathered.

And if one life is saved because of something that began here, or perhaps many lives, I can only hope

that is part of the good we are able to carry forward from losing Stone.

I cannot know what the future holds for these young men. I cannot promise that every lesson will be remembered or that every conversation will make a difference. But I can continue showing up, sharing what I have learned, and making certain there is a place where they know they are welcome.

These young men have continued showing up. They've shared their thoughts, their struggles, their laughter, and their time. They've allowed me to continue being a father in a way I never expected. Not their father, because they have fathers of their own, but a father who cares about them and hopes that something he has learned might someday become useful in their lives.

And they've given something back to me that I couldn't have anticipated when we first sat down together.

Maybe that's the silver lining I've been discovering.

I cannot change what happened to Stone. But I can hope that what we build in his memory changes what happens to someone else.

I began this journey hoping I could give these young men something worth carrying forward. What I didn't expect was how much they would give me to carry forward as well.

And perhaps years from now, when one of them opens this book again, he'll remember more than the words of a particular lesson.

He might remember a Thursday evening around the fire. A conversation with someone he hadn't spoken to in a while. A meal he helped prepare. Or the familiar sight of his friends lining up for dinner.

Maybe he'll even remember something I said that didn't make much sense to him at the time, but means something entirely different to him now.

I hope he remembers why we gathered.

And I hope he remembers that **there was always a place for him at Stone's Table.**

WHAT WAS ON THE TABLE?

Stone's Table — The Fellowship Project

21 Gatherings • June 4 – October 22, 2026

Twenty-one gatherings. Twenty evenings of sharing food and fellowship, with one gathering held virtually.

01 · June 4 · First Gathering

Smoked brisket, pork butt, and tenderloins

02 · June 10 · Mandy's Sendoff

Montana Sunrise Chicken — Smoked pineapple-marinated chicken, pineapple rings, candied bacon, cowboy caviar, and broccoli salad

03 · June 18 · Virtual “Violin”

Virtual gathering — no shared dinner

04 · June 25 · One Word: Around the Fire

Pizza around the fire

05 · July 2 · When We Don't Have the Answers

Bring Your Own Meat Night — Everyone brought their choice of meat, and Ted was the personal grill-master

06 · July 9 · Two Months — What We Carry Forward

Burgers, hot dogs, brats, and macaroni and cheese — the boys brought the meat

07 · July 16 · The Weight We Carry

Rosati's Pizza — Cheese, sausage, pepperoni, and half sausage/half pepperoni

08 · July 23 · Finding Your Direction

Italian sausage and chicken sausage with avocado and jalapeño, served on buns

09 · July 30 · What Does Loss Reveal?

Jewel-Osco Fried Chicken — 48 pieces, mashed potatoes, corn, and baked beans

10 · August 6 · Let Go Again

Brady's Gourmet Burgers & Cheeseburgers — Prepared by Brady on a black iron cooking surface

11 · August 13 · Isaiah 41 — Where Does Our Strength Come From?

Walking Tacos — Andrew's suggestion

12 · August 20 · The Rut, The Lie & The New Trench — Part 1

Italian Feast — Meatballs in red sauce, chicken sausage with peppers, shrimp with Alfredo and aglio e olio sauces, pasta, and bread

13 · August 27 · Part 2: Carry Each Other's Burdens

Domino's Pizza — Sausage, pepperoni, New York-style pizza with banana peppers and Italian beef

14 · September 3 · Part 3: Handing Off the Weight

Flank Steak & Lemon Noodles

15 · September 10 · What Brings Excitement to Your Day?

Skirt Steak & Al Pastor Tacos — Prepared by Meech

16 · September 17 · What Will Be Better Because I Was Here?

Lasagna & Caesar Salad

17 · September 24 · What Are You Going to Better?

Jewel-Osco Fried Chicken — Potato salad, corn, mashed potatoes, and Angela's coleslaw

18 · October 1 · I've Got Your Six

Make-Your-Own Pizza Night — The boys brought frozen pizzas, prepared their own, and shared

19 · October 8 · Are You Owning Your Stone?

Grilled BBQ Chicken Breasts & Potato Salad

20 · October 15 · Chicken & Wine

Angela's Chicken & Wine Dinner — Chicken with mushrooms, water chestnuts, onions, and sherry-butter sauce

21 · October 22 · Chili Night

Ted's Hog Chili Mashup — Chili, chili mac casserole, and cornbread muffins

—A Place at the Table

Looking back over these twenty-one gatherings, there were some elaborate dinners, a few simple pizzas, and

evenings when the boys brought their own food or took over the cooking themselves.

It was never necessary for every meal to be something special. What mattered was that we kept coming together.

Somewhere between preparing dinner, filling plates, sharing food, and cleaning up afterward, the fellowship was happening long before I began delivering a lesson.

The lessons gave us something to think about. The meals gave us a reason to gather. And the friendships gave us a reason to keep coming back.













THE GOLDEN LINING

A Special Story to Share



From Texas to Mexico



FROM TEXAS TO MEXICO

Letters to the Future — The Ted Journals

October 16–17, 2026

THE TRIP THAT NEVER HAPPENED

There are some nights you plan for, and others you simply find yourself living.

Tonight wasn't supposed to be one of these nights.

I was supposed to be in Texas.

My two boys and I had plans to attend a Formula One race. The tickets had been arranged through a customer of my oldest son's, and the weekend was something we'd been looking forward to.

Three grown men enjoying a weekend together.

I'd already imagined what it might look like.

I lived in Texas for a short while when I was younger, and there are things about that place that have stayed with me. The weather, the smells, the people, and the hardworking nature of it all.

I wanted my boys to experience some of that.

I imagined us walking through the crowds at the track, taking in the atmosphere, listening to the engines, and enjoying something none of us had to be responsible for.

We'd probably find ourselves in a steakhouse afterward. Or maybe some little hole-in-the-wall burger

joint where the food was better than the building looked.

It wouldn't have mattered.

We would have laughed, had a few drinks, talked about the race, and probably stayed up too late considering how early we'd need to get moving the next morning.

There was no business to conduct.

No project to complete.

No responsibility to fulfill.

Nothing was bringing us there except the enjoyment of being together.

I think that's what I was looking forward to most.

Not necessarily the race.

But standing somewhere between my two handsome young men, knowing that everything I loved about being their father was right there beside me.

I wouldn't have needed to say much.

I could have simply looked from one to the other and smiled.

These are my boys.

But that trip never happened.

And tonight, instead of sitting somewhere in Texas with my sons, I'm sitting in my cigar room.

My wife is out of town attending a wedding. My oldest son is spending the weekend with his girlfriend.

The dogs are here. The cat has settled in.

And the music is playing.

It always is.

I've spent much of the evening listening to worship music. Songs about surrender, faith, grace, and making room for God.

The kind of music that doesn't necessarily demand your attention but somehow finds its way into the thoughts you're already having.

I have a book I'm writing. Lessons I'm preparing. A fellowship I'm building in honor of my youngest son.

There is always something that needs my attention.

But tonight, I didn't feel like building anything.

I just wanted to sit.

And somewhere between the music and the quiet, I found myself back in Mexico.

THE MORNINGS WE HAD

It was January.

Our family had taken a vacation together, the four of us.

My wife and I had reached that wonderful season of parenthood when our children were no longer little boys.

They were young men.

They still had their challenges, their uncertainties, and their growing to do. But they were becoming their own people.

And something particularly wonderful had happened along the way.

They still enjoyed being our children.

They liked spending time with us.

They thought we were fun.

And we genuinely enjoyed their company.

Our days in Mexico generally began the same way.

I was usually the first one awake.

I've always enjoyed getting up early enough to watch the sunrise, especially when there's an ocean involved.

There's something about watching the world wake up that I've never grown tired of.

I'd make my way down to the beach while the resort was still quiet, find a few chairs, and claim our little piece of paradise for the day.

I'd arrange some towels, settle into a chair, and watch the horizon.

Sometimes I'd sit in silence.

Other mornings I'd put my earphones in and choose something that seemed worthy of the view.

Music has always had a way of accompanying my thoughts, and there are few things more beautiful than watching the sun rise over an ocean while listening to something that moves you.

The whole process might take an hour, sometimes an hour and fifteen minutes.

The colors would change.

The clouds would begin revealing their shapes.

And eventually, that great ball of fire would be standing proudly in the sky, announcing that another day had arrived.

By then, my family would begin finding its way down to me.

My wife was usually first.

She had a mission of her own.

Find the perfect perch and get to work on that vacation tan.

She'd settle into her chair, arrange herself just right, and begin what I considered a rather impressive commitment to absorbing every available ray of sunshine and always having the space to move her lounge chair like a hour hand on a clock to follow the sun.

My youngest would generally appear next.

He'd find his place, get comfortable, and before long we'd be making our way into the water.

My oldest?

Well, he had his own relationship with the morning.

He was never much of an early riser.

He enjoyed his recovery sleep, particularly after an evening of enjoying himself.

We might not see him for another hour or two.

But eventually he'd come wandering down, looking for the rest of us.

And then we'd have our family together.

We'd spend hours going between the chairs and the ocean.

Getting hot.

Running into the water to cool off.

Laughing.

Splashing one another.

My youngest and I enjoyed searching for seashells.

We'd walk along the ocean floor, feeling around with our feet, convinced we'd discovered something worth investigating.

Sometimes we'd spend an unreasonable amount of time trying to retrieve whatever we'd found.

Only to come up holding a piece of seaweed.

We'd laugh, toss it aside, and go right back to searching.

It wasn't particularly productive.

But then again, **we weren't there to accomplish anything.**

Eventually, hunger would get the better of us, and we'd wander over to the lunch tables near the pool.

There was always something good to eat.

Maybe a piña colada.

Maybe a cerveza.

Then we'd head back to our chairs and settle into the afternoon.

No schedules.

No deadlines.

Just the sun, the ocean, and the people I loved.

Although, as I would soon discover, one member of our family occasionally had a schedule of his own.

He just didn't always feel the need to share it.

THE WALK

That afternoon, my oldest son had finally made his way down to the beach.

He'd been sitting with us for a while when I could tell he was getting restless.

He looked around at the three of us.

"Anybody want to walk the beach?"

My wife was in her prime.

A combination of tanning oil, sweat, salt water, and complete relaxation had apparently reached the perfect balance.

Her eyes were closed.

She wasn't moving.

My youngest had just gotten out of the ocean, settled into his chair, and ordered himself a cocktail.

He wasn't going anywhere either.

I'd been sitting long enough.

"Yeah, I'm in. Let's go."

And off we went.

Two barefoot men in swimming shorts, walking along the beach.

It started pleasantly enough.

Side by side.

Talking.

Looking at the ocean.

Enjoying the scenery.

But within a few minutes, something changed.

My son began picking up the pace.

And I don't mean a pleasant little stroll.

I mean he started walking like a man who'd just remembered he was late for something important.

Within minutes, I was practically speed-walking to stay behind him.

Now, someone might describe this as a *brisk walk*.

But there is absolutely nothing brisk about the Mexican sun beating down on two shirtless men walking through hot sand.

The only thing brisk was the pace my son had apparently decided we needed to maintain.

And I wasn't leading.

I was following.

Or perhaps more accurately, **pursuing.**

My oldest has long legs.

He's always had long legs.

And he's always had a tendency to want to lead.

Even when he was little, I'd take him for a walk to the park or go riding bicycles with him.

He might begin behind me.

Then he'd move alongside me.

And within minutes, he'd be out in front.

Rarely looking back.

Apparently, becoming a grown man hadn't changed that particular habit.

There he was, cutting through the sand like he had a mission.

I just hadn't been briefed on what the mission was.

We passed the beach belonging to our resort.

Then another resort.

Then another.

I remember thinking perhaps we should turn around.

But by the time I'd finished considering that possibility, he'd already put another fifty yards between us.

So I kept going.

Before long, we'd made our way beyond the resort properties and into a public beach area.

And suddenly, the atmosphere changed.

There were families everywhere.

Children playing in the sand.

Brothers and sisters arguing.

Little kids crying because they were covered in sand or somebody had taken something that belonged to them.

Mothers calling after children who were wandering too close to the water.

People playing soccer, volleyball, and games I'd never seen before.

Music was coming from every direction.

Some people were dancing.

Others were gathered around food.

And the smells!

There was food cooking everywhere.

Different spices.

Different meats.

Different dishes.

The air was rich with the smells of families enjoying a day together.

It was wonderful.

I wanted to slow down and take it all in.

Maybe do a little people-watching.

Enjoy the atmosphere.

But my son had apparently mistaken our leisurely beach walk for an endurance event.

And there he was.

This tall, long-legged white kid with a goatee, weaving through the crowd like he knew exactly where he was going.

Meanwhile, I was trying to keep him in sight without stepping on somebody's picnic.

At some point, I managed to stub my big toe on a piece of coral.

And when I say stubbed, I don't mean I merely bumped it.

I tore the tip of it open.

Now I'm bleeding.

And every step I take is leaving a little bloody print of my big toe in the sand.

A trail of evidence documenting my son's complete disregard for his father's physical well-being.

I wanted to yell his name.

But I already felt a little out of place, and I wasn't particularly interested in announcing to the entire beach that I couldn't keep up with my own kid.

Then I saw him stop.

Finally!

He looked back toward me.

Then he looked ahead.

Then he glanced up toward a hill of sand leading away from the ocean.

And before I could catch up, he made a beeline straight up the hill.

For crying out loud.

My calves were burning.

My shins were sore.

My toe was bleeding.

And now we're climbing a hill?

I finally got close enough to say something.

"Hey, slow down, pal. I wrecked my foot!"

He barely missed a step.

“You’ll be fine.”

And kept walking.

You little ass.

I couldn’t help laughing.

Because he clearly had somewhere he wanted to go.

I just had absolutely no idea where that was.

THE WRONG SIDE OF THE RESORT

Before long, we found ourselves on the street side.

Now we’re walking down a sidewalk.

Barefoot.

Shirtless.

In swimming trunks.

Among people going to work, waiting for buses, and going about their everyday lives.

Cars and trucks were passing.

Motorcycles were weaving through traffic.

There were police officers carrying automatic weapons.

And my son was walking through it all as confidently as he’d walked along the beach.

I could see people noticing him.

Not necessarily with concern.

More with that curious expression people get when they see someone who clearly doesn't belong in the setting.

And there was my boy.

Walking as though he owned the sidewalk.

Meanwhile, I was still trying to keep up.

My toe was leaving little bloody reminders of our journey.

And the smells had changed considerably.

Gone were the wonderful aromas of families cooking along the beach.

Now we were passing overflowing garbage cans, discarded food, and places near bus stops where the smell of rotten food and stale beer hung in the heat.

I remember thinking how quickly we'd gone from paradise to somewhere I wasn't particularly interested in exploring barefoot.

But my son kept walking.

Eventually, the sidewalk came to an abrupt end.

We had two choices.

We could turn around and retrace our steps following my bloody toe print which had formed a path back.

Or we could continue along the roadway for what looked like another half mile, with cars and trucks flying past.

There was also a third possibility.

A rough hillside leading back down toward the ocean.

Rocks.

Bushes.

Trees.

And plenty of vegetation that looked capable of tearing a man's bare feet apart.

Naturally, my son chose the hillside.

Because once that boy had decided to go forward, turning around was apparently not an option.

Down he went.

I followed.

And that's when I noticed a group of about six men gathered beneath a tree.

These weren't tourists spending an afternoon at the beach.

They were fully dressed.

Jeans.

Shoes.

Shirts.

A couple were sitting on a cooler.

Others were leaning against the tree.

They were enjoying some beers and relaxing together.

Nothing particularly unusual about that.

Except we were two barefoot tourists wandering down a rough hillside toward their little gathering.

And my son was heading straight for them.

I remember thinking we should probably move to the right.

Give them some room.

Or maybe even consider turning around.

"Hey, Son—"

He glanced back.

"We're fine, Dad."

And kept walking.

He walked right through their gathering.

A little wave.

A few words.

One gestured back with a cigarette in his had.

And he was past them.

I could hear a couple of the men talking as he went by.

I couldn't understand everything they were saying, but I imagined they were probably wondering who this lanky kid was and where he thought he was going.

Then they noticed me.

Following behind.

Bleeding.

Barefoot.

Trying not to fall down the hill.

I offered a smile and a wave.

“Hola! Gracias!” - Hello! Thank you!

“Tengo un Hilo loco” - I’ve got a cray kid

“No te preocupes por nosotros” - Don’t mind us.

Just a father and son taking what was apparently the most unnecessarily complicated route back to the beach in the history of Mexico.

Unlike my son, I decided to walk around the group.

Which required me to navigate dangerously close to a thorny bush.

At that point, I probably would have been better off walking straight through with them.

Eventually, I made it down to the sand.

I caught up with him near the water.

“Steel, that was a crazy walk. Can you slow it down? I can’t keep up. This old man is hurting!”

He looked at me.

“It hurts to walk slow.”

I couldn’t believe it.

“Well, I need you to deal with the hurt, because your old man is hurting to walk fast! I’m a lot older than you, and I can’t do any more of this. We gotta walk back slow. Please.”

And to his credit, he did.

He slowed down.

And we walked back together.

Side by side.

Along the ocean.

Past the public beach.

Past the resorts we didn't belong to.

And eventually, back to our own.

When we arrived, my wife was still enjoying her afternoon.

She looked up.

"How was your walk?"

My son answered as casually as if we'd just gone to the end of the driveway.

"Good. I'm gonna grab some lunch and head back up to the room."

Then he turned toward his brother.

"You wanna go?"

And off they went.

I sat down beside my wife.

Held up my foot.

And showed her my toe.

"I felt like I was chasing him when he was seven years old on one of our bike rides."

And I started laughing.

Because I realized something.

That little boy who always wanted to be out in front of me hadn't changed nearly as much as I thought.

He'd just gotten taller.

And considerably harder to keep up with.

GETTING READY FOR THE EVENING

Our afternoons generally continued until my wife decided it was time to begin preparing for dinner.

She always seemed to know precisely how much time she needed.

And apparently, that amount of time was considerably greater than what the three of us required.

She'd eventually sit up, gather her belongings, and announce:

"Okay, I'm going up."

Which meant the evening preparations had officially begun.

Shower.

Hair.

Makeup.

Outfit.

Shoes.

Purse.

Jewelry.

The whole production.

And I loved it.

I've always admired the way my wife takes care of herself.

She has an eye for fashion and knows how to put things together.

And after all these years, I still enjoy watching her get dressed for an evening out.

She's beautiful.

She's sexy.

She's desirable.

And I make no apologies for being a man who's still crazy about his wife.

I imagine our boys have rolled their eyes more than once at the way I look at their mother or the things I say about her.

But I also like to believe there's something they admire about it.

Something reassuring about growing up knowing your father doesn't simply love your mother because she's your mother.

He loves her because she's the woman he still wants beside him.

Meanwhile, the boys and I would stay down by the beach a little longer.

Another Paloma.

Another laugh.

Another conversation.

Until eventually I'd look at the time and realize we'd better get moving.

"All right, boys. We gotta go. Your mom's gonna get restless. We've got a reservation to make."

They'd head toward their room on the other side of the resort.

I'd head upstairs to ours.

Three-minute shower.

Done.

Not much preparation required when you're bald.

I'd throw on a shirt, some pants, and whatever shoes seemed appropriate.

And I'd be ready.

Meanwhile, the boys would be scrambling.

Sometimes they'd call their mother asking what they should wear.

Other times they'd show up at our room looking for a belt.

Or asking if she could iron a shirt.

And I can still picture them standing in front of those full-length mirrors.

Taking pictures.

Flexing.

Adjusting their shirts.

Checking themselves out.

Looking pretty damn proud.

Which always made me smile.

Because at home, getting those two boys to dress up for something could become a negotiation.

They were much more comfortable in jeans and black T-shirts, usually with a little grease somewhere on them.

But on vacation?

They had their vacation clothes.

And they enjoyed wearing them.

Sometimes they'd look in the mirror and laugh.

"I look stupid in this."

And we'd tell them they looked great.

Because they did.

Two handsome young men.

Dressed up.

Feeling good.

Ready to go out with their parents.

And eventually, the four of us would leave the room together and make our way toward whichever restaurant we'd chosen for the evening.

THE QUESTIONS

One evening, after dinner, we found ourselves in a small lounge reserved for preferred club members.

It was a comfortable little room where we could enjoy some specialty cocktails and relax together.

We'd already spent the entire day in the sun.

Everyone was a little tired.

But nobody seemed particularly eager to end the evening.

My wife reached into her purse.

And pulled out a tiny deck of cards.

They weren't ordinary playing cards.

They were miniature, maybe an inch and a half wide and two and a half inches tall.

And instead of numbers and suits, each card contained a question.

The idea was simple.

Someone would draw a card.

Read the question aloud.

And everyone would answer.

The questions were personal.

Some were intimate.

Others were funny.

Some made you think.

Others led to stories.

And before long, we found ourselves completely engaged.

Four people who'd known one another their entire lives, in one way or another, sitting around a table learning things about each other.

We laughed.

We listened.

We answered.

And sometimes, I imagine, we surprised one another.

We kept going until we'd worked our way through the entire deck.

Every question.

Every answer.

Nobody seemed interested in stopping early.

And when we finally finished, we moved outside to a patio overlooking the ocean.

It was beautiful.

The air had cooled.

The water stretched out into the darkness.

And we settled in for another cocktail.

We'd had a long day.

The sun has a way of taking something out of you, even when you've spent most of the day doing absolutely nothing.

My wife was getting tired.

My oldest son was ready to head back to the room.

And my youngest?

I could tell he still had a little more evening left in him.

I looked at him.

"You wanna go have a cigar?"

He didn't hesitate.

"Yeah!"

I smiled.

"All right. I'll be right back. I gotta go grab two."

I headed up to our room.

My wife was getting ready for bed.

I told her I was going back downstairs to meet our youngest.

We were going to have a cigar.

She looked tired.

Ready to crawl into bed.

She gave me a kiss.

"Okay."

And I headed back downstairs.

I had no idea that the next few hours would become one of the most memorable evenings of my life.

THE CLUB BENEATH THE RESORT

When I met my son again, he had another idea.

“You wanna go have another drink?”

“Sure. What do you have in mind?”

He suggested a nightclub we’d noticed at the resort.

It was located down in the basement.

We hadn’t really explored it yet.

So we decided to take a look.

As we made our way downstairs, I could feel the bass moving through the stairwell.

That deep, steady vibration that lets you know there’s music playing somewhere beneath your feet.

The air grew cooler as we descended.

There was something almost mysterious about it.

A nightclub hidden beneath a tropical resort.

The room was dark, but colorful neon lighting illuminated the space.

Music filled the air.

We looked around.

Took in the atmosphere.

Ordered ourselves a drink.

And sat for a while.

We talked.

Shared a story or two.

And did a little reconnaissance.

This is kind of a cool place.

I remember thinking it might be somewhere worth returning to.

After a while, my son tapped me on the elbow.

He gestured toward the stairs.

Time to go.

We took our cocktails and headed back upstairs.

As we stepped outside, I looked at him.

"You still wanna have that cigar?"

"Yeah, for sure."

"Let's go down to the beach."

He hesitated.

"I don't know if we can. It might be closed."

I smiled.

"We can get down there."

And we did.

TWO CHAIRS AT THE WATER'S EDGE

The beach was quiet.

The crowds had gone.

The chairs that had been filled with sunbathers all day were sitting empty in the darkness.

The ocean was still there, of course.

Moving in and out.

The waves breaking against the sand.

And above us, the moon and stars.

I dragged two lounge chairs down toward the water.

Not just near the beach.

I wanted them right where the waves finished their journey onto the sand.

Close enough that we could hear the water moving just a few feet in front of us.

We settled into the chairs.

I handed him his cigar.

And we lit up.

I've enjoyed cigars for years.

There's something about the ritual I've always appreciated.

The preparation.

The first draw.

The way the smoke changes as the cigar develops.

And perhaps most of all, the way a good cigar can accompany a good conversation.

The nice thing about a cigar is that you can make one last as long as you want.

And sometimes, the conversation doesn't end until the cigar goes out.

That night, the conversation began almost immediately.

And it went deep.

Not because I steered it there.

Because my son did.

He began asking questions.

Talking about life.

About things he'd been thinking.

About what he believed.

I could tell where the conversation was heading.

And I was excited.

For some time, I'd been gathering regularly with a small group of men.

A few of us would get together every couple of weeks, share a cigar, and discuss the things men encounter in life.

Faith.

Fatherhood.

Marriage.

Responsibility.

Current events.

The well-being of the human mind.

The challenges of trying to balance everything we're expected to carry.

The conversations could last three hours.

Sometimes longer.

I'd invited my son to join us on several occasions.

He'd always seemed genuinely interested.

But something inevitably conflicted with the meeting.

Work.

Plans.

Life.

That night, sitting beside him on the beach, I brought it up again.

I told him how much I'd enjoy having him there.

How I thought he'd appreciate the conversation.

And this time, he seemed particularly interested.

"When's your next one?"

I told him we'd probably get together again after the holidays.

He nodded.

"I want to join."

I smiled.

Then he asked:

"What do you guys talk about?"

And there we were.

Two men sitting beneath the stars, looking out over the ocean, talking about the things that have occupied the minds of men for thousands of years.

God.

Religion.

Politics.

Faith.

The way people think.

The way we live.

The things we believe.

The things we question.

And the difficulty of making sense of it all.

There was no audience.

No schedule.

No reason to hurry.

Just a father and his son.

And two cigars.

THE CIGAR LESSON

Now, there's something you need to understand about my youngest son.

When he became interested in something, he tended to become very interested.

And that evening, he was enjoying his cigar.

Perhaps a little too enthusiastically.

I could see him drawing on it.

Again.

And again.

And again.

I looked over.

"How warm's that cigar getting?"

He examined it.

"Kinda hot."

I laughed.

"You're hotboxing that thing. Slow it down. You're losing the flavor."

He looked at me.

I began explaining how the heat changes the taste.

How a cigar is meant to be enjoyed slowly.

How you don't need to keep drawing on it constantly.

And how the moisture at the end can affect the flavor.

I showed him how I rolled the cigar between my fingers while drawing from it.

How that helps encourage an even burn.

How you can sometimes judge the quality of a cigar by its ash.

He listened.

Asked questions.

Tried adjusting his technique.

Then went right back to enjoying himself.

I was taking my time with mine.

He was working through his like a young man who'd been given a mission.

Before long, he'd finished.

But the conversation was still going.

And I wasn't finished with my cigar.

He looked over at me.

"What's yours taste like?"

I laughed.

"You don't ask another man what his cigar tastes like, Son."

He grinned.

"Can I take a draw?"

Now, there are certain things about cigar etiquette that a man learns over time.

And sharing a cigar isn't necessarily one I'd encourage.

But there we were.

Father and son.

Sitting beneath the stars.

And he was curious.

I hesitated.

Then extended it toward him, and like that we were sharing the rest of the cigar.

“Sure.”

He took a draw.

Considered the flavor.

Then looked at the end of my cigar.

“The tip of yours isn’t as wet as mine was.”

I laughed again.

“We’re not supposed to lick it!”

He examined the cigar.

Took another draw.

And decided mine was stronger than the one I’d given him.

He liked his better.

“Well noted.”

And we continued talking.

I remember looking out over the water.

Then over at him.

Watching the glow of the cigar as he drew on it.

Listening to his thoughts.

Enjoying the conversation.

And feeling something I wish I could have held onto forever.

Not because I was teaching him anything extraordinary.

Not because he'd said something that changed my life.

But because we were simply enjoying one another.

Two grown men.

A father and a son.

Sharing a cigar.

And talking about life.

He shared with me that God was still present in his soul, and that he was pursuing more.

That evening beneath the moon and stars, sitting just above the water on those lounge chairs, became one of the most memorable nights I've ever spent with my boy.

A night I wish I could dream over and over.

THE BOOTH

I still need to look back through our vacation photographs to confirm whether the nightclub celebration happened the following evening or whether another day separated the two.

But regardless I remember the night itself clearly.

After dinner, the four of us made our way down to that nightclub beneath the resort.

The same room my youngest and I had explored together.

Only this time, we were all there.

I remember sitting in one of those open booths near the dance floor, I've always called them suicide booths.

The lighting was dim enough that everyone could see us, but we couldn't necessarily see everyone looking our way.

My wife was sitting beside me.

And she looked incredible.

She always has.

And I remember enjoying the simple pleasure of sitting beside her while our boys were having a good time.

I was probably wearing a white T-shirt, black vacation pants, and flip-flops.

Nothing fancy.

But I felt like a million bucks.

Across the room, on the opposite side of the dance floor, another celebration was taking place.

A group of young men and women had gathered around several tables decorated with party hats and streamers.

It looked like a wedding celebration.

Perhaps the couple was getting married that weekend.

Maybe it was simply a getaway with their friends before the big day.

We never asked.

But there was no mistaking that they were celebrating something.

The group appeared to be Chinese.

And my youngest son noticed them almost immediately.

He watched them for a while.

Then announced:

“Those are my people. My other half. I’ve gotta go introduce myself.”

His girlfriend was Chinese and Polish.

And somewhere along the way, he’d apparently decided that made him an honorary member of the family.

My wife and I exchanged a look.

We were a little nervous.

Not because we doubted his ability to make friends.

But because we weren’t certain the group was Chinese.

And we didn’t want him accidentally offending a room full of strangers by assuming their nationality.

But he was already moving.

This tall, lanky, skinny white boy stood up and walked straight across the room.

No hesitation.

No awkwardness.

No concern that they might not speak much English.

He approached their circle.

Started shaking hands.

Introducing himself.

Smiling.

Laughing.

And before long, he had his phone out.

He was showing them pictures of his girlfriend.

We watched as the young men began smiling.

Laughing.

Giving him high-fives.

Whatever he'd said, it was working.

He'd walked into a gathering of complete strangers and somehow made himself part of the celebration.

When he returned to our booth, he confirmed that they were indeed from China.

My wife and I smiled.

Our concern had been unnecessary.

He'd already made friends.

And apparently, he wasn't finished.

He looked at us.

"I'm gonna go buy them drinks."

Then turned toward the bar.

My wife looked at me.

I looked at her.

And almost simultaneously, we both started laughing.

"How's he gonna buy them drinks? We're at an all-inclusive resort!"

We laughed at the absurdity of it.

But our boy apparently had a plan.

A moment later, we spotted him coming back through the crowd.

And behind him was a bartender.

Carrying a tray full of shots.

We watched as our son lead the bartender all the way across the room to his newfound friends.

Then he began personally handing out the drinks.

One by one.

Making sure everyone had one.

He raised his glass.

And the entire group joined him for a toast.

And just like that, the tall, skinny white kid from Illinois had become part of their wedding celebration.

My wife and I couldn't stop laughing.

Not because he was making a fool of himself.

Quite the opposite.

Because he was being exactly who we'd always known him to be.

And he wasn't finished.

Throughout the evening, he kept returning to that group.

More laughter.

More drinks.

More introductions.

And eventually, he decided it was time to get everyone dancing.

THE BOY WHO BROUGHT THE ROOM TO LIFE

There was a live band playing that night.

And anyone who's ever played music for an audience knows how much energy a band draws from the people in front of them.

You can have the finest musicians in the world onstage, but there's nothing quite like watching a room come alive.

My youngest son apparently understood that.

He started with his new friends.

One by one, he encouraged them out of their chairs.

Then he moved toward the surrounding tables.

Then toward the people standing near the bar.

Before long, the dance floor began filling.

The band noticed.

You could see the energy changing.

The musicians were enjoying themselves.

The crowd was responding.

And suddenly the room had become something entirely different from what it had been an hour earlier.

And somewhere in the middle of it all was our youngest son.

One fist raised high in the air.

Hopping on one leg.

Bouncing to the music.

Wearing the biggest smile you could imagine.

He wasn't trying to impress anyone.

He wasn't looking for recognition.

He was simply having the time of his life.

And somehow, he'd convinced half the room to join him.

I remember looking over at my oldest son.

He was laughing.

Then he'd look back at his brother, shake his head, and laugh some more.

My wife and I were doing the same thing.

We'd exchange glances.

Smile.

And look back toward the dance floor.

There he was again.

Fist in the air.

Bouncing.

Laughing.

And bringing another group of strangers into the celebration.

He didn't know those people when he walked into the room.

By the end of the night, you might have thought he'd arrived with them.

And sitting there watching him, I remember feeling something that went beyond pride.

There was a certain satisfaction in recognizing that the young man dancing across the room was becoming exactly the kind of person we'd hoped our children would grow up to be.

Someone comfortable in his own skin.

Someone who could walk into a room full of strangers and make them feel like friends.

Someone who understood that sometimes the best way to enjoy an evening was to make certain the people around you were enjoying it too.

But I wasn't sitting there analyzing any of that at the time.

I was too busy laughing.

And so was his mother.

And his brother.

That's what I remember most.

Not what we were learning from the experience.

But how much fun we were having watching our boy live it.

CONTENTNESS

As I sat in that booth, I remember wondering what the people around us thought when they looked over at our family.

Maybe some older couple was remembering when their children were that age.

Maybe a younger couple was imagining having a family of their own someday.

Maybe someone was simply enjoying watching two young men having the time of their lives.

I don't know.

But I remember feeling proud.

Not proud in an arrogant way.

Grateful.

Grateful for the woman sitting beside me.

Grateful for the two young men we'd raised.

Grateful that after all the years of work, responsibility, uncertainty, and sacrifice, we were sitting there enjoying the very people we'd spent our lives loving.

And I remember sitting there feeling something I wish I could bottle and keep forever.

Contentness.

I don't know if that's a proper word.

But it's in my dictionary.

It's the feeling of being completely satisfied with what's in front of you.

Not because everything in life is perfect.

But because, for that moment, nothing else is needed.

Parenthood carries a weight that's difficult to explain to someone who hasn't experienced it.

It's anticipation and excitement.

Confusion and frustration.

Dreams and disappointment.

Admiration and doubt.

Empathy, sympathy, sadness, sorrow, laughter, and contentness.

And the remarkable thing is, **you don't experience those feelings one at a time.**

Sometimes you experience every single one of them in the blink of an eye.

You spend years carrying that weight.

Not because your children are burdens.

But because loving someone that deeply means their lives become inseparable from your own.

And my wife had carried that weight right alongside me.

That night, I remember feeling like we deserved to give each other a high-five.

Look what we've done.

Look at these boys.

Look at this life.

We deserved nights like that.

And we deserved many more.

Eventually, I got out of that booth.

I took my wife onto the dance floor.

And our boys were right there beside us.

For the last song, all four of us were dancing together.

There was no great revelation.

No extraordinary event.

Just a family enjoying one another.

And I was happy.

TWO BOYS, TWO SEASONS

I've thought a lot lately about the different relationships I've shared with my sons.

My oldest was my sidekick when he was little.

I would have chosen riding around with that nine-year-old boy over working alongside a seasoned tradesman any day of the week.

He'd ride with me to the lumberyard, the tool store, or a job-site.

He understood my projects.

He understood my vision.

And he genuinely enjoyed helping me bring those ideas to life.

He was my buddy.

My best friend.

My youngest was different.

He enjoyed being home with his mother, spending time with his friends, and doing things around the house.

Of course, he came along with me too.

But he wasn't quite the same little traveling companion his older brother had been.

Then something happened as they grew older.

My oldest began finding his independence.

He graduated high school, experienced the complications of young love, and started navigating the

uncertain territory between being a boy and becoming a man.

Our relationship began changing.

And while that was happening, my youngest began moving closer.

Breakfasts.

Lunches.

Conversations about school, work, money, relationships, and his future.

He wanted my thoughts.

And I wanted his.

I found myself becoming increasingly fascinated by what my boys were learning.

I wanted to hear about their work, their projects, and the things they were discovering.

Sometimes I probably asked too many questions.

I suppose that's what fathers do when they're interested.

But something unexpected was happening.

I was becoming a student of my own sons.

And I loved it.

Yet even as that relationship with my youngest grew stronger, I sometimes worried about my oldest.

Did he notice?

Did he feel excluded?

Did he think I enjoyed his brother's company more?

I knew what it felt like to grow up between siblings, watching attention move from one child to another.

I never wanted either of my boys to question how deeply I loved them.

But raising children is a delicate thing.

You can love them equally without always knowing how to reach them equally.

And sometimes, while you're celebrating the closeness you're developing with one child, you're quietly missing the closeness you once shared with another.

That is one of the simplest analogies I can provide for being able to feel love and happiness at the same time while feeling helpless and sad and unsure. Somehow your mind allows you to compartmentalize that so naturally.

THE YEARS WE THINK WE HAVE

My youngest son died on May 9.

There is no graceful way to write that sentence.

No clever arrangement of words that makes it easier to read.

And certainly no way to make it easier to live.

He was twenty years old.

We had so much more life to experience together.

So many conversations that hadn't happened.

So many places we hadn't visited.

So many ordinary days that I had every reason to believe were still ahead of us.

Texas was supposed to be one of them.

And now, five months later, I find myself thinking about something that frightens me almost as much as the grief itself.

Time.

I still have my oldest son.

I love him beyond anything I could explain.

But the friendship we shared when he was younger has changed.

We're both different men now.

And sometimes, even ordinary conversations between us become uncomfortable.

He withdraws.

I become confused.

I wonder what I said.

Then I become frustrated.

Then quiet.

And eventually, I feel rejected.

We love each other.

I know that.

But loving someone and knowing how to reach them aren't always the same thing.

And I have a fear that I struggle to put into words.

What if we spend the next ten or twenty years trying to find our way back to one another?

What if someday he becomes a father himself, and suddenly everything I've been trying to express makes sense to him?

What if we finally understand each other completely?

There may be forgiveness.

There may be laughter.

There may be a beautiful friendship waiting for us.

But what about the years between now and then?

We don't get those years back.

I know that now.

In a way I wish I never had to learn.

And perhaps that's what scares me most.

Not that my son and I won't eventually find our way back to each other.

But that we might spend so much time trying to understand one another that we forget to enjoy the life we're still fortunate enough to share.

THE FATHER AND THE FRIEND

I sometimes wonder when the relationship between a father and his son is supposed to change.

When does the teaching stop?

When does the correcting stop?

When does the responsibility of raising a child finally give way to the privilege of enjoying the man he's become?

I don't expect my oldest son to be perfect.

I'm certainly not.

And I know there are lessons he still needs to learn.

But sometimes I find myself wondering when we're going to get past the arguments, the misunderstandings, and the frustration.

When will we simply be able to enjoy each other's company?

When will we be able to have a conversation without it becoming something more complicated than either of us intended?

There have been times when we've had disagreements that became heated.

Things were said that shouldn't have been.

And I have to give my son credit.

He has a good heart.

When those moments happen, he often comes back.

Sometimes a few hours later.

Sometimes the following day.

He apologizes.

He explains where he was emotionally.

And he tells me we're good.

I believe him.

I know his apologies are sincere.

And I always accept them.

But somewhere inside me, there's still a father asking a question.

When is he going to learn?

I don't particularly like admitting that.

Because I know what it sounds like.

But there's a difference between accepting someone's apology and no longer feeling the weight of what happened.

I can forgive my son and still be disappointed that we've found ourselves in the same situation again.

And perhaps that disappointment shows.

Maybe it's in my face.

Maybe it's in my body language.

Maybe it's in the silence that follows.

I don't know.

I try to keep it under the lid.

But emotions have a way of escaping even when we believe we've contained them.

And I've begun wondering whether my son sometimes sees something in me that I don't intend for him to see.

Maybe he senses that I'm still evaluating him.

Maybe he feels that every conversation carries the possibility of becoming another lesson.

Maybe the father who's genuinely interested in his life and the father who's still trying to guide him are showing up at the same time.

I don't know.

But I do know something about myself.

I've always been curious about my boys.

I want to understand what they're doing.

What they're learning.

What they're thinking.

What they're planning.

And when I ask questions, it's usually because I'm genuinely interested.

But I also recognize that curiosity and guidance can sometimes become tangled together.

Perhaps my son doesn't always know which one he's getting.

And perhaps I don't always recognize when I've crossed from one into the other.

That's difficult for me to admit.

Because I've spent my life believing that being an involved father was one of the greatest gifts I could give my children.

And I still believe that.

But maybe being involved in the life of an adult son requires something different from being involved in the life of a little boy.

Maybe there are times when he doesn't need me to teach him.

Maybe he simply needs me to listen.

And maybe there are times when I need to allow myself to enjoy the conversation without worrying about what he might learn from it.

That sounds simple enough.

But I don't know that it is.

Because the father in me doesn't simply disappear when my son becomes a man.

And I don't think I would want him to.

MAKING ROOM

Tonight, the music has been moving through the room almost as though it has a mind of its own.

Songs about surrender.

Songs about faith.

Songs about making room for God.

And somewhere in the middle of listening, I found myself thinking about what God really means in my life.

I've spent years understanding faith through the traditions and teachings of religion.

But increasingly, I find myself recognizing something simpler.

God is life.

Not merely the ceremonies, the buildings, or the traditions.

Life itself.

The moments we're given.

The people we love.

The opportunity to experience something beautiful without needing to explain why it's beautiful.

I don't believe every meaningful experience needs to become a lesson.

Sometimes we should simply be allowed to live it.

And perhaps that's what I'm trying to learn now.

How to make room.

Room for sorrow without allowing it to consume every moment of joy.

Room for my oldest son to become the man he's becoming without requiring him to arrive there on my schedule.

Room for myself to remain his father without feeling responsible for teaching him something every time we're together.

And room for God to work in ways I don't yet understand.

I don't know what the coming years will bring.

I don't know whether the friendship I long for with my son will return tomorrow, next year, or through a thousand ordinary moments we haven't yet experienced.

But I know I don't want to spend those years waiting for life to begin again.

Because life is happening now.

Even when it doesn't look the way I imagined.

Even when someone is missing.

Even when the music brings tears instead of laughter.

THE RICH MAN

It's getting late.

The cigar has been burning slowly.

The dogs are settled nearby.

The house is quiet.

And another song has found its way into the room.

Rich Man.

The harmonies are beautiful.

And I find myself thinking about that booth in Mexico again.

My wife sitting beside me.

My oldest son laughing.

My youngest son bringing an entire room to its feet.

Four people who loved one another, enjoying a night that none of us knew would become so precious.

I remember sitting there wondering what the other people thought when they looked at our family.

Tonight, I think I know what I would have seen if I'd been sitting across the room looking back at myself.

A man in a white T-shirt and flip-flops.

His beautiful wife beside him.

Two handsome young men enjoying life.

And a smile that didn't need explaining.

A rich man.

Not because of what he'd accumulated.

But because of what he'd been given.

And I knew it.

I knew how fortunate I was that night.

I didn't need to lose my son to understand how much I loved my family.

But losing him has changed the way I understand **time**.

And that's something I'm still struggling to comprehend.

I know now that the moments we expect to experience tomorrow may never arrive.

I know that loving someone doesn't guarantee we'll always know how to reach them.

And I know that the years we spend waiting for things to become better are years we're still living, whether we're enjoying them or not.

Those seem like simple truths.

Almost painfully simple.

And there's something about that simplicity that troubles me.

How can something so unimaginable, so devastating, leave behind an understanding that sounds so ordinary?

Enjoy the people you love while they're here.

Is that really what I'm supposed to take from all this?

It almost feels disrespectful to the magnitude of what has happened.

As though a few carefully arranged words could somehow explain the loss of my son.

They can't.

And I don't want them to.

I would give all my possessions to have him sitting beside me again.

To hear another story about his day.

To ask another question that might annoy him.

To watch him laugh with his brother.

To have one more evening when my wife and I could look across a room and exchange that familiar smile.

Look at our boys.

And perhaps that's what makes this so difficult.

I can recognize the value of the life that's still in front of me without knowing how to fully embrace it.

I can want a closer friendship with my oldest son without knowing how to reach him.

I can believe there are beautiful experiences still waiting for my family without being able to imagine what they'll feel like with someone missing.

Knowing what matters doesn't mean knowing how to live without what mattered most.

And tonight, I don't have an answer for that.

I don't know how long it will take for my oldest son and me to find our way back to the friendship we once shared.

I don't know whether the sadness of losing his brother will always find its way into our happiest moments.

And I don't know whether I'll ever experience another evening when I feel as completely content as I did sitting in that booth in Mexico.

Maybe I will.

Maybe I won't.

But I don't want to pretend that I've figured something out simply because I've found words that make sense of it.

Understanding isn't the same as healing.

And perhaps that's where I need to leave this tonight.

Not with an answer.

Not with a promise that everything will eventually become beautiful again.

But with the memory of a night when it was.

A night when my wife was sitting beside me.

When my boys were laughing.

When the music was playing.

And when I had no reason to imagine that someday I'd be sitting alone, remembering it all.

We deserved more nights like that.

I still believe that.

And I don't know what to do with the fact that we won't have them.

So tonight, I'll sit here a little longer.

I'll listen to the music.

I'll remember Mexico.

And I'll miss my boy.

From Texas to Mexico.

Funny how far a man can travel without ever leaving his chair.

THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE STORY



And though I've told this story without giving them names, they are the heart of it.

The woman who still turns my head after all these years is **Angela Michelle** .

The little boy who once rode beside me everywhere, and the young man I'm still



learning how to walk beside, is **Steel Alexander**.

And the tall, skinny boy who could walk into a room full of strangers and leave them feeling like friends —



The one with his fist in the air, bouncing to the

music, wearing that unmistakable smile—

The young man who sat beside me beneath the stars, sharing a cigar and asking questions about life—



His name is **Stone Walker**.

And I am their husband.

Their father.

The richest man I ever knew how to be.



T.A.



AN OPEN CHAIR

If you've made it this far, thank you for spending some time with my family, our stories, and the fellowship we've been building.

If you've enjoyed what you've read, there will be more to come.

The stories aren't finished. Neither are the conversations, the lessons, or the friendships being built along the way.

And if you'd like to stay plugged in, drop in and let me know. I'd love to hear from you.

Our door is open.

There's always room for another conversation, another story, another friendship.

And most importantly—

There's an open chair at Stone's Table.