

Addressing trauma and loss:

A personal conversation with Steve Carter

TRANSCRIPT

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NOTE: This transcript was AI-generated and has not been fully edited.

Mark Turman (00:02.35)

Welcome to the DF podcast. I'm Dr. Mark Turman, executive director of Denison forum. We want to see you, your church and our communities flourish in a biblical way. And we hope that today's conversation will help all of us to do that a little bit better. Our guest today is Steve Carter, and we're going to talk about his new book that we'll get to in just a moment. But let me give you a little bit of background to both Steve and the story of this book. It seems like forever ago because it was on the other side of the COVID pandemic. But in 2018, in the light of misconduct allegations against the pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, Bill Hybels, known to most of us, Steve Carter announced at that time that he was publicly resigning what he calls his dream job, which was to be the lead pastor of the church. It was a season that came after that of crying out to Jesus in grief and desperation, asking what many pastors and church leaders probably would ask as well. What do I do now? What am I supposed to move toward? And this, prompting of the Holy spirit around three keywords that we're going to talk about, which are also the title of Steve's book, grieve, breathe and receive. And I just got to tell you, as soon as I heard those words, I thought, well, I've lived those words. So I think they probably apply to many of us. Those words would become something of a mantra for Steve. And we're going to get him to talk about that. It led into a season of struggle. It led into a season of contemplation, led into a season of deep healing that we want to unpack with him today. And so we're glad to have you along for the conversation. So Steve Carter.

Welcome to Denison Forum World.. We're glad to have you as our guest.

//stevecarter (02:04.544)

It is an honor. Thanks for having me on and just love what you all are about and the ways that you are just creating opportunities for connection and deeper dialogue.. So thanks for having me. It's a true honor.

Mark Turman (02:21.934)

Yeah. Great to get to do this. And, and, as I said a moment ago, great to get to meet you now, for some of us, depending upon how old you are, it would be hard for some of us to imagine that everybody that is a church leader, a pastor, doesn't know the backstory of the book that we're going to talk about, but it grows out of the, the traumatic experience of what happened at Willow Creek in the,

About eight years ago, eight, nine years ago, many of us, as I told you before, we began recording as a young church planter, young church leader. I took people with me that were helping to plan our church. We went to church conferences. We particularly went to Willow Creek. We identified with it because it was a suburb of a large city. Same kind of situation in the church plant that I was leading. We wanted to learn. We wanted to grow. We wanted to see what we could gain. And so.

highballs became a libel's larger than life figure for me. And the church was just this enormously beautiful, powerful place, where God seemed to be doing so many things. but that story and what happened in, in and around 2018 becomes the backdrop. Can you kind of just summarize that for us and particularly for those, that may be coming into ministry and finding our podcasts and don't know the story.

and how you were a part of it. Can you kind of frame that as a foundation and a context for us?

//stevecarter (03:55.68)

For sure. Let me start back just in 1975. Willow began out of a high school ministry. A lot of people don't know this, but you've been on that property in South Barrington, but 270 people showed up at a local bank to take out personal loans because they were so captured by the vision of the local church.

that Bill was teaching from about Acts 2. And this church grew to roughly 25 ,000, 30 ,000 people on a given weekend, seven, eight campuses, probably somewhere between a third to a half a billion dollars in assets. That was just the church. Then you have the Global Leadership Summit, which was reaching 500 ,000 people, very influential.

And, you know, Bill was this spiritual father. He was a mentor. And in 2012, I had known him years before that. He was just kind of this mentor from afar. He invited me to come on staff as the director of evangelism and a teacher at large. And as I came on staff, it was pretty quickly got thrown into a succession process, which felt a little like the Christian Hunger Games. And I,

It was a five year process. And in 2017, myself and another person got announced as the two kind of heirs to succeed Bill. And it was announced October, 2017 on the weekend of my 38th

birthday. And I was so excited because the following anniversary of the church, the following October, Bill was going to hand over the baton to the two of us. It was my dream job. It was incredible. And within four months.

the stories that you brought up, allegations of sexual misconduct, abuse of power, came to the forefront in the Chicago Tribune, which is our biggest newspaper in Chicagoland area. And it was, it was like a gut punch to so many. I mean, some of the elders knew, a couple of staff people knew, but other than that, none of us knew. And.

//stevecarter (06:16.256)

Now we're like picking up the pieces, trying to figure all this stuff out. And it just felt like every day I was learning something new. And every day another story was breaking. Another day, another hint of something might be coming on social media. And it was August 5th, 2018 when the New York Times posted a new story. And this story was Bill's former executive assistant. It had...

notes, it was her telling her story. It was, graphic. It was just, it was gut wrenching and she did a very, very brave thing telling her story. And I just watched the church, in many ways, some of the senior leaders just wanting to minimize that story. And I, I felt like there was a profound cognitive dissonance between what I believe the role of a shepherd and pastor was to be even.

even if it was your spiritual father and mentor, because you are playing with people's trust when you get on that stage and open up the Bible. And I just couldn't play that game. And I ended up resigning and I resigned, you know, this is resigned via a blog on a Sunday morning because I just knew we had eight campuses. It wasn't.

going to everyone was going to be able to hear it at the same time. And I felt like this was the way at which we could honor honor the actual story of the victims and really begin the process of getting to the truth. And so that was 2018 six years ago. And it just threw my life into a tailspin because I saw what my life was going to be. I was expecting I loved my life. And then it was.

Okay, now what? Now what do we do?

Mark Turman (08:14.766)

No, which the book unpacks in a very powerful and dramatic way. So six years of a really, really unexpected journey. Why now? Why write the book now? What prompted you to say, OK, I'm ready to talk about this at this level? I don't want to give away all the thunder of the book, but there's enough of the back story.

Mark Turman (08:44.238)

to create the context, but would want everybody hearing this conversation to know that this is, this is not a, it's not a presentation or a referendum on Willow Creek itself, or even on bill Hybels. That's really just simply the context of this book, but why now? And, and, what prompted you to decide to put it on paper and offer it, as a tool for others in their own journey.

//stevecarter (09:12.288)

Yeah, that's a great question. And, you know, I think in some ways, shortly after I resigned, I felt like the Lord told me, go to the desert and wait for instructions. And I thought that was metaphorical. I didn't think it was literal. But my wife is from Arizona. And so that next morning, I just shared with her what I sensed the Lord was saying. And she teared up and she said, I've been sensing the same thing and I want to go home.

And I then realized, wow, we are actually moving to a literal desert. And I went to the desert with two questions. And the first question was, why do we do what we do? And this comes out of like Roman 7:15. I do not understand what I do. The good I want to do, I just don't do the thing I hate, I do. And I really was trying to figure out why do people do what they do? I mean, nobody wakes up and says, I want to...

self-sabotage and train wreck my character and integrity, but why does it happen in every medium and field of life? Why? And that led to the first book, which was *The Thing Beneath the Thing*. And then the second question, which was harder for me to really wrestle with was, what do you do in life does what it so often does? When it shocks you, when it punches you in the gut, when what you never thought was possible,

shows up at your doorstep. And that for me just became something I had to wrestle with and learn. And so for those four years that we lived in the desert, I just went to work on trying to answer those two questions. I think coming out of the desert season, I felt like there was enough for me, enough healing in one sense, enough understanding, but the more that I found myself just talking about these three words.

talking about the faith that just was uncovered in this desert season, the ways that God met me, it just seemed to be resonating and people just kept saying, please put that down in paper, please, please help us. And so for me, this is not a Christian TMZ. It's not like some hit piece. This is just one man's journey when he was so familiar with achievement.

//stevecarter (11:37.984)

and knew how to achieve, but didn't necessarily know how to grieve and how the framework of Holy Weekend really became a roadmap in and through and with grief that just changed everything for us.

Mark Turman (11:54.638)

No, and I want to I want to unpack those words in a little bit. But I want to before we do that, I want to as a word to pastors that have to make big decisions, hard decisions. So much of the book is framed in the context of this decision to resign. The idea of resigning and getting out of that broken, toxic environment versus the idea of staying in and being a redemptive agent from the inside. I know I, after pastoring churches for 35 years, I've been in that situation. I suspect many pastors have been or will be in that kind of a situation. When do I stay? When do I go? How did that become clear to you? How did the Spirit of God walk you through that? I can imagine some pastor going, they're trying to decide right now. Do I just need to get...

out of this situation, or should I stay and try to work inside of it as a redemptive agent? How did that work for you?

//stevecarter (12:58.784)

Yeah, that's really great. And I'm a guy who would rather stay. I probably would stay longer than I should in most situations. I did not want to leave Willow. And I think you have to have a little bit of just context is shortly after these stories came out, I'll never forget it. I...

I got this phone call and it was an executive team call and Bill said, I'm resigning. And so we basically set it up for a few days later and I showed up and there was probably about 3000 plus people there in the main auditorium.

lead elder, the other lead pastor, Bill Schaer. And then I come up and I say a prayer and, and then the family walks down and Bill walks down and I think they're walking to the bullpen. That's where all the pastors and the family typically would sit and see. And then they just, they just kept walking and they walked right out of the building. And Mark, that auditorium, you've been in there.

I mean, seats somewhere between 70 to 178 hundred seats. I mean, it's a hundred million dollar building. I mean, he raised that money. I mean, there's an 890,000 square foot facility, over a hundred acres, multiple campuses. And it dawned on me in that moment, you could build all of this and then it's gone overnight.

And it, like, I, it didn't, it didn't hit me until I just watched him and I'm like, he's never coming back. So I say that because there was never a full on ownership of what Bill did. It wasn't until years later where they did an investigation and they began to name it from an outside entity of what Bill's actions actually were.

//stevecarter (15:09.76)

But we didn't hear that from Bill, number one. So when you don't hear from the top person, and if that would have happened, I would still be there. But because that didn't happen, then it falls to the elders. The elders are in charge of leading the church. The elders didn't necessarily handle it in a way. And again, when you're not in a denomination, this is a non-denominational church, I mean, these are local business leaders, not -for-profit leaders.

Now they're tasked with overseeing this massive global crisis. They don't necessarily know how to do this. They don't know what to do. And then it goes to the other lead pastor. And I don't feel like it's actually being handled in a way that would be honoring to the bride and honoring to this happened in their sin in the house. And we have to call it out. So.

For me, when I saw that article in the New York Times, I thought to myself, now this is the time that we can get up and say, and we called an early morning Sunday morning meeting, and there were people saying, we can't talk about this. We can't talk about it. And I'm like, it is being retweeted hundreds of times in just a matter of moments. This is a massive story, and we can't just go up there and...

and pretend like nothing happened. And I just got really sick in my stomach and we had a back office bathroom. I went to that back office and Mark, I just threw up. Like my body reacted to the fact of I'm a pastor. We can't play with people's trust. Why are we doing it this way? And as I was washing my face, I was reminded of something my high school youth pastor would often say to me and something I would say to my son.

And he'd always say, Steve, I don't care how many points you score when I was in high school and junior high. I don't care what you do. What I care is that you had integrity and integrity is something that will take seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, seasons, years, decades to achieve and seconds to lose. And then he'd ask me, did you have integrity today? And when I became a father for the first time,

//stevecarter (17:35.104)

my son Emerson, who's now a sophomore in high school. But when he was two years old, I just start by putting him to bed. And before I pray over him, I just say, Emerson, did you have integrity today? And he said, I think so. And then he'd ask me, Dad, what about you? And I'm like, I think so. And then we'd pray and he'd go to bed. We just did this. This was just like our little thing. And I just kept reminding him of what Hal had taught me. And when I was washing my face,

at in the back office bathroom after just throwing up and just sick to my stomach. I wondered to myself, if Emerson asks me, did I have integrity today? And I go on that stage. I'm going to have

to lie to him or I'm have to be honest with him that I didn't do the harder, right? And it was almost this clarifying moment for me to say, you know what? If I,

If I feel that for my son.

This is, and my body has just pushed out whatever was in my body from the night before. There is a reaction that is happening to this.

And I had already, the other thing I'd say is I had already pushed to say, hey, here's some stuff that needs to happen. And the women had basically said, if you do this, we'll show up at the table. But some of the leaders just did not want that to happen. And so I just felt like I was handcuffed as if I was like the speaker of the house, just in front of people, just reading press releases rather than actually pastoring and pointing people towards true North. And because of that, I just said,

Mark Turman (19:00.078)

Mm -hmm.

//stevecarter (19:23.904)

can't play with people's trust. I want to have integrity. I want to stand for what's right. And I want to stand for the victims who, in my opinion, were the true heroes of the story. And it's going to cause me to resign. So that's why I didn't stay. Sorry, this is a little bit of a longer context, but just for those who don't know, I want people to understand.

Mark Turman (19:38.51)

Yeah, no, that's okay. No. Yeah. So coming off of that, just, this has been a growing curiosity with me as a pastor and church leader, which is, do you think that, I mean, we're seeing these kinds of things happen all too frequently and it's, it is not in any way an indication that, every pastor, every large church pastor loses his integrity. but as, as you.

But have gone through this, Steve, and have, have experienced it and continue to work your way through it. Is there a message in here about, about, Christian scale and celebrity that we just need to think better about? is, is there a warning in here? some of this story.

kind of reminds me of what we said about general motors back in 2008, 2009, you know, too big to fail. it just feels like there's some kind of a scale celebrity dynamic that Christians are just really in many ways lousy at handling when a ministry gets to a certain scope and scale and the attention that gets brought with it. Is that something that we just need to think more about?

//stevecarter (20:57.44)

I think that there's probably multiple layers to look at this. In one sense, narcissism can happen in a small church up into a large church. Sexual misconduct, abuse of power, mishandling of finances can happen in any size of church, and we see that. I think what's interesting though is as a church gets larger, the institutional...

Mark Turman (21:05.134)

Mm -hmm. Yeah.

//stevecarter (21:27.424)

preservation often kicks in. If you take out a loan, right? Like the bank is going to ask who is the key man. So they have key man insurance. Well, that's that makes sense from a financial model. But also, if you think about that, that puts a lot of power in that senior pastor to say, hey, if you're not going to let me do this, you want that note? You want to handle that? You want to figure that out? Like it just it gives a level of unchecked power.

Mark Turman (21:30.158)

Hmm. Yeah.

//stevecarter (21:57.472)

that I think leaders have to constantly be aware of their shadows, their blind spots, where they are susceptible. The other thing I would say is in 2017, I was invited to the Vatican to meet the Pope. And I never met the Pope before and I was like, all right, I'll go. And I...

the night before we were meeting with his social media director, which I think is hilarious, and he's a historian, and we're seated with this guy, and he's talking, and then he just says, hey, do you have any questions about the Catholic Church to the group of us? And nobody raises their hands, and this is before I know anything about Bill. But I just raised my hand, and I'm dumb enough to ask a question, but I said, you've had some...

some popes that seem to be celebrated within Catholicism, but you've had some popes that seem to be really far off the brand. You know, like they bought the role, they had kids, they were like very power hungry. How do you tell your story in view of these popes who weren't great representatives of your ideology?

Mark Turman (22:59.886)

Hmm. Yeah.

//stevecarter (23:19.328)

And he said, that's a great question. And he said, you know, what's interesting is every time we've had a bad pope, it has led to a new order. So if you think about Pope Borgia, not a good dude, multiple kids, I mean, he's just not a good dude. But that led to the Jesuit order. And...

And basically what I heard him say was these new orders were trying to pull us back to center, to a more central focus. Here's what I'm sensing right now. Within Christendom, you're seeing this emergence or re-emergence really of spiritual formation. You're seeing this sense of a new order built around character, Christlikeness.

Mark Turman (24:06.83)

Mm -hmm.

//stevecarter (24:15.296)

humility, even within the younger leaders, having a little bit of a sense of just because it's big doesn't mean it's better. It almost means it's scarier. I got to be more aware. And I think that's actually healthier. And I'm hoping that as we go through that, we'll have more emotionally intelligent, more spiritually dependent, more people hungry for formation.

Mark Turman (24:29.07)

Yeah. Yep.

//stevecarter (24:44.768)

and more character, Christ-likeness, leaders and shepherds and pastors leading us into the future.

Mark Turman (24:52.654)

Yeah, I hope so. Yeah. And I sent some of that among younger people as well. And, as, as we like to talk about at church, everybody needs accountability, you know, and you need to, and you have to give it away. People can't come and take it from you. You have to give it away and then let the people you give it to actually exercise it, you know, and, but everybody needs it.

Everybody needs it. Steve, when I was pastoring churches, we, we came to have an understanding that trouble comes in waves and it also comes in multiples.

we used to talk about if some, if somebody, if something happened, we had a bad situation or somebody, passed away, in one of the churches, we talked about how, Hey, if one person died, we could expect two more to die in the next two weeks. And sometimes it exactly was that. But part of what your story in this book of grieve, breathe and receive is about is that.

It wasn't just what was going on in the public side of your ministry at Willow. There were other losses, other changes, other trauma that was happening that really kind of seemed to have a compounding effect. Tell us about that side of the story.

//stevecarter (26:01.056)

Yeah, so about eight, nine months after I resigned, we're in the desert and my dad dies. And so my adopted father who had just taken me as his own, my last name changed to his. I mean, he was just a real gift to my life, especially in the last few years.

And I, I had this sense that I lost a spiritual father and I lost an earthly father and it just, it was gut wrenching. I had always wondered who my biological father was and my biological father, after he and my mom had gone their separate ways, he, remarried and I got a random phone call.

and email from this widow and she she wrote this email first and she just basically said hey you sound like chuck you look like him and

//stevecarter (27:20.192)

I just wanted you to know that. And basically, it was just like this like out of the blue and somehow saw a clip of mine on social media of preaching and she reached out. And it led me to find out that I always thought that Chuck had left me, that he signed the adoption papers, but she told me he signed it thinking it was just...

him having to like be relieved from paying child support. And so they went to go pick me up when I was four and I wasn't there. And they knocked on the door and they knocked on the neighbor's door and the neighbor said, I think they moved to Michigan and there's no internet. There's, there's no cell phones. Like, what do you do? And she said, Chuck found out where you were when you were nine or 10 and just thought to himself, if I.

Mark Turman (28:04.75)

Wow.

//stevecarter (28:18.336)

try to show up now, he's not gonna know who I am. And I'm gonna get into this massive court fight and I'm gonna do probably more emotional damage. So when he's ready, maybe we'll get a chance to meet. And when I tried to find him years earlier, I found out that he had passed two years earlier. And so it's just like all of this stuff starting to come, like you said.

Mark like in threes, these waves. And I'm like, okay, the Willow thing was hard enough. Losing my adopted dad. I mean, he, he was a guy, he was like walking with me. He, he, he was a myth. To now, like so much of my childhood was framed around Chuck leaving. And I thought I, if I don't perform well enough, then people will leave me. And that wasn't even the actual story. And so it just felt like a bit of.

identity house of cards just started to fall. And, and yet in the most beautiful ways, it was a way to have it be really built up in a much stronger and healthier foundation.

Mark Turman (29:29.006)

Yeah. Yeah. Some, some deep, deep, big experiences of loss and change and, and, and, but, but out of all this, like I said, comes this comes these three words comes this mantra of grieve, breathe and receive kind of give us a, a short framework description of that and how you started to see that kind of aligning with the story of Easter, the weekend of Easter. that is.

is marked by trauma and then by silence and then by this incredible revelation that we all have staked ourselves, our whole lives on in our eternity on how did those things start to line up together?

//stevecarter (30:11.136)

Yeah, so the day after I resigned, we were in Madison, Wisconsin, because I just knew news cameras would be at our house. I got up super early in the morning, my kids and my wife were sleeping in the hotel, and I just went for a walk. And you've probably had these moments where you were just desperately crying out to God, I need a word, I need an answer, I need a verse, I need something. I don't have a job, what did I just do? Am I getting paid? I don't know what's next. God, please give me something. And I didn't hear a thing.

And I kept walking and I sat outside the Capitol in Madison, Wisconsin on a bench and I just cried out again. And those three words came, grieve, breathe, receive. And I remember writing them down. I went to this little donut coffee shop, a couple blocks down the road. And I just wrote, I have to grieve what is, grieve what I thought it was going to be, grieve how key people let me down.

to breathe in new mercies. I have to exhale all bitterness and resentment and anger. And I have to receive what I need to learn, receive, if anything, what I need to own and receive who Christ wants me to become in light of all of this. And that became just kind of a gift from God, like marching orders. This is what you're gonna do. Grieve, breathe, receive. And fast forward, we moved to the desert and I'm hiking Camelback Mountain one day and...

And it's a great hike. And I just was thinking about grieve, breathe, receive. And I'm one of those guys, teachers, like who, if I can find a healthy framework, it really, a healthy biblical framework, it makes my life work so much better. And I just was praying about those words. And then all of a sudden it dawned on me. Holy weekend. I mean, Good Friday, the most unjust, unfair action took place.

Mark Turman (31:48.014)

Mm -hmm.

//stevecarter (32:02.368)

perfect man, our Lord, our Savior, our Rabbi, our teacher died. He was hung on a cross. He did not deserve that kind of a death, the mocking, all of it. And if you think about that, that pushed those disciples who had no idea Sunday was coming. I mean, Jesus had said stuff as like a rabbi, you know, you tear down the temple, I'll rise it back up in three days. But they were like, what is he talking about?

And they're sitting in this Saturday scared out of their mind. Like what happened to them? Him? Is it going to happen to us? Are we going to get arrested? What is our future going to be? We left our parents job. Are they going to take us back? Like what now? And then Sunday comes and the surprise of all surprises where death is defeated. And all of a sudden I realized, grieve is good Friday. Breathe is this silent Saturday and receive is the surprise.

Mark Turman (32:38.734)

Mm -hmm. Yeah.

//stevecarter (33:02.848)

Easter Sunday. And then I started thinking back to being in Israel in 2014 and seeing a rabbi. I walk into this rabbi and I'm like, Hey, rabbi, can I ask you a question? In the Hebrew scriptures, which we know as the Old Testament, you have these places that serve as these metaphors, Egypt, the desert, the promised land. Egypt is this place of slavery. That's not right and unfair. The deserts, this place of wandering and the promised land, this place of milk and honey. How much time do you think people spend?

in each of those three places in the course of their life. And the rabbi looks at me and goes, you Americans are so funny. You think everything is up and to the right, not us. We think that 10 to 15 % of your life is in Egypt, 10 to 15 % of your life is in the promised land and the remaining 70 to 80 % is in the desert. And that just hit me because now I'm in the desert. I've just hiked this trail and I realized, wow.

The Hebrew nation was a month's journey or so from the promised land and it took them almost 500 months to get there. And I just realized, man, I think that's so many of us. We don't know how to grieve. We don't have a framework. And so we just start walking and wandering. And I just found that through Good Friday, Silent Saturday and Easter Sunday really showed me how to grieve, breathe and receive and really.

of connect deeper with what Jesus invites us into in the death, the burial, the resurrection.

Mark Turman (34:37.358)

Yeah. And I got to, when I got to that part of the book, I really got frustrated. It's like, I don't, I don't want to be that person that wanders around for 500 months, you know? and, and, but, but oftentimes that is the case. it also made me think, Steve, when I was, when I was working through this part, particularly around the grieving part and, you know, every pastor that pastors, even for a little time, you know, the first funeral.

Or an unexpected funeral shows up and you run to your Bible and you know, so many of us find that great passage in first Thessalonians four about grieving with hope. just even trying to figure out what that really means. We know it means heaven. We know that it means that God has an ultimate answer in the resurrection, but here's, here's the other thought process I had around that idea and around that question, which is God, you referenced this a minute ago, but God gives us this ability.

to anticipate the future, to look ahead, to have expectation or at least anticipation. and then we all go through this experience where our dreams and the things that we were anticipating the expect expectations that we had that our life would go this certain way. And that gets disappointed at some level, oftentimes as your story illustrates on a grand level.

and that ushers in this enormous experience of struggling with faith. Steve, I've even had the experience at times in my life where I've like, okay, God, I guess I'm not supposed to have any expectation. I'm just supposed to, I'm supposed to repent of any expectation, good, bad, or indifferent. how, how does this whole thing of grieving disappointment.

grieving, as your story illustrates, grieving the death of your actual biological father, as well as then your adoptive father. How does this whole grieving with hope thing really work?

//stevecarter (36:41.664)

such a, I love this, because Steve Arterburn says that the epidemic of the local church is unresolved grief. That everyone in the pews is carrying unresolved grief because for many of us we've just not taught our people how to handle it. And that unresolved grief, becomes grievances. Like think about Jenga, just like it just becomes grievance after grievance and we just start carrying all of these grievances around and then a shock or a punch or a disappointment and it's almost as if the whole thing just starts falling and just hits the ground and we're now left with all of these pieces and we're like, what do I do?

Mark Turman (37:04.374)

Yeah.

Mark Turman (37:19.182)

Hmm. Yep.

//stevecarter (37:26.08)

I think the first thing I would say is you always have to ask yourself what day of Holy Weekend am I in? Am I in Friday? Okay, great, I'm in Friday. Am I in Saturday? Okay, great, I'm in Saturday. Am I in Sunday? Fantastic.

Mark Turman (37:33.216)

Mm. Yeah.

//stevecarter (37:39.904)

The human discipleship formation is that we need to be the kind of people who can hold Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. And we can be with Christ in the suffering and His death. We can be with Christ and alive in Christ with hope in the resurrection of Sunday. We've gotta be the kind of people who can, but we typically, for many of us, we choose one or the other. We can wallow in the Friday, but we don't have any hope, or we can just minimize all of the grief and all of the sadness and just, it's going to be better someday. It's going to be better someday. And we just bright side our way through. But I realized the kind of hope that I actually preached was different than the hope that I embodied. I mean, I, I, I hoped in a way that was wildly uncertain and whimsical in the way that I just, you know, I hope the university of Michigan wins the national chaps championship. I hope. It just, it was, it was me saying, I hope that happens. I don't know if it's going to happen. But when you look at the way that Paul talks about hope, he, he, he dares to hope me in such a way that he desires something good, even in the midst of grief, even in the midst of suffering, I'm desiring something good. And it's not an agenda. It's for heaven to invade that moment.

Mark Turman (38:39.406)

Right.

//stevecarter (39:07.008)

for him, his theology was not just that I could not just to desire something, but desire something good. Because if the tomb is empty, anything is possible. I mean, what's what's harder that marriage to be restored or a man to wake up from the grave? I think it's the man who wakes up from the grave. So if you know, if the resurrection changes everything, if the tomb is empty, and we really believe that the resurrection.

brings certainty to any situation, which allows us to expect that good is on its way. It doesn't come in our timing, but biblically. Romans 8 28, Philippians 1 6, good is on its way. And God's gonna carry that through. So I say all that to go, once I realize that biblical hope, whoo, in the midst of the grief, 1 Thessalonians 4 14, like you quoted.

And that allows me to hold the sadness, but not just hold that, but also hold in the other hand, this expectation. Good is on its way. And I also like for me, I still anticipate, I still have expectations for what I love to see in the church. I just don't hold it as tightly as I once did. I hold it pretty loosely. And I just realized, God, if it goes that way,

Mark Turman (40:29.27)

Yeah.

//stevecarter (40:34.336)

Thanks be to God. And if it doesn't go that way, I'm still hopefully gonna say thanks be to God and trust you because I believe that you've got better in store for me.

Mark Turman (40:45.806)

Yeah. Cause it, you know, one of the things you learn after being in ministry for a little while, a couple of things I've observed is one is it sometimes feels like we're just all a bunch of keystone cops. And you, you wonder if God's just getting things done in spite of us instead of with us or through us sometimes, which is, can be humorous, but also can be very demoralizing in terms of, Hey, I, I thought God could really do something.

with and through us as a congregation and he can, and we should always remember that. But, one of the things that was really intriguing to me just about this, this whole story, the way you framed it is, is really this part about breathing. and, and I love what you just said that you need to think through what part of the Easter weekend are you in? Right. And, made me also think, I don't know if you're a James clear fan.

who writes about habits, but James clear wrote a couple of weeks ago. You know, I need to, I've, I've learned to think about my problems is are they puddles or are they leaks? You know, a leak is something you got to give immediate attention to. And that's really kind of the good Friday thing is, Hey, it's triage and they're just certain things. Hey, my, my wife or my child is struggling or this, this particular thing has to be attended to right now. There are.

There are problems that are like leaks. And then there are other problems that are like puddles and they're just all kinds of mud. And you just leave it alone for awhile and it'll settle the dirt will go to the bottom of the water will become clear. That really helped me to think, better. But as Christians, we just don't really like Saturday very much in terms of Holy Saturday. And I, I imagine we're going to spend a few hundreds or a few thousands of our years asking those early.

Christ followers. Okay. What were you doing on Saturday? What were you thinking? What were you feeling? What were you doing? in between the cross and Easter Sunday morning, how did

any of you get the courage to actually gather? I know in one particular difficult season that I had in ministry and in my church, I didn't want to be around anybody. And a good friend and church leader said,

Mark Turman (43:03.662)

And you need to fight that tendency because you need the fellowship of God's people right now more than ever. Okay. talk about that breathing season and that breathing moment. If you're, if you're going, okay, the leaks are covered and the immediate trauma has kind of been addressed. What needs to happen? What needs to be the thought process that happens on that silent Saturday experience of breathing, breathing in the desert.

How do you want us to think about that?

//stevecarter (43:34.368)

Yeah. So in the grief journey, Friday, you are in grief. Saturday, you're starting to think, okay, can I get through this grief? Like, how do I get through it? You started almost like trying to Jedi mind trick yourself. Like I can get through this faster. I can get through it, you know? And again, I go back to that desert and the desert's the deserted place. this is where.

Mark Turman (43:50.862)

Mm -hmm.

//stevecarter (44:01.44)

You know, we know this, you know, we can say words like koinonia, you know, as partnership or fellowship, or we can say simple truths like God is with me, God is for me, God will never leave me nor forsake me. It's a simple truth. And then all of a sudden you find yourself in the suffering or the struggle or the silence.

And you wonder, does that statement still hold up? Is God still with me here? Is he still for me? Is he never gonna leave me and forsake me? And this is where I think the formation happens. I would say that the majority of humanity is like the Hebrew nation who wanted to make a golden calf who wanted to start grumbling, who wanted just to go back to what was familiar and they start bargaining. Can we just go back? It'd be better to be in Egypt. We have that in our Saturday experience. And really what it is is what is our relationship to waiting? And for many of us, we hate the wait. You know, it's like...

Starbucks isn't ready with our coffee. We get, you know, we get frustrated. You can't microwave spiritual formation. It takes time. But the second thing that's a little even more dangerous is we don't just hate the weight. For many of us, we waste the weight and we, we turn to unhealthy

escapes. We just try to escape that feeling of liminality of in-between of uncertainty. We saw this during COVID, so many people just kind of returning to.

previous addictions or just some strongholds overtaking them. And I really think that the invitation is not to hate the weight and waste the weight, but in the silence to win the weight and to watch God actually take those simple truths that we know from the texts, but in the midst of the struggle, the suffering, the silence, to watch how they prove to be true. And when they proved to be true,

//stevecarter (46:12.032)

They're not simple anymore. They are profoundly weighty and sacred. And when we preach that God is with us, it's different. People feel it differently because it's like this fire that has just shut up in our bones. It has to come out as Jeremiah talks. So I would say just as you think about that, what, you're in your Saturday, what's your relationship to waiting?

And my working definition for grief is honor what comes up when change shows up. Can you honor the feelings, the full spectrum of feelings that you feel with this change? Can you sit with that and not just try to push or move on or move past it really quickly? Can you allow God to begin to shape and form your heart to actually trust that He is safe, He is consistent, and He is with you? Because once you do that, the—

The quicker you can do that, the more you open yourself up to a Sunday that is coming, that God wants to come for you so that you can experience a new kind of breakthrough.

Mark Turman (47:20.59)

Yeah. So good. It makes me, it just makes me think about a lot of things, but how most of the time when change comes, even if it's positive change, we interpret it as loss or we fear it is loss. and nobody hardly ever talks about the fact that even after Paul was converted on the Damascus road, he goes off for a period of almost a decade or more, and we don't hear anything from him. And God is doing some formation stuff, to reorder his heart and reorder his mind and, and.

Just redirect him on a grand scale, but we have this, you know, we read the book of Acts, we think he got baptized and then all of a sudden he just starts planting churches. It didn't work that way. but it's such an important part of it. And just to give yourself time to let God do the forming that he needs to do to prepare you for what comes next. Steve, just a few more minutes, in this conversation, but one of the things that's woven throughout this story, as you've written it down, is the story that not only you took, but that you and your wife and your children took. So many pastors are concerned about this and rightly so being a pastor, being a church leader, is not simply a job. It is a calling and it is oftentimes the calling of a family. that, that puts you together on a journey. That's really not like any other journey. I have a good friend who ministers to

pastors, he says, you know, pastoring is one of those few, if not the only job where you have to win at work and at home for it to really be what it's supposed to be. talk about how, what would you just say as a way to pastors to both encourage and equip them about caring for not only themselves through these kinds of journeys, but caring for their family, caring for their marriage.

//stevecarter (49:14.176)

Yeah, this is a big one. I think that there's so much more conversation that needs to happen, especially from the pastor's wives' experience. I think it would be really, really enlightening for many of us. I've always taught our kids that in ministry, and this was even before anything happened at Willow, there are pains in ministry, there are privileges in ministry, and there's promises.

And so here's a pain. I'm having lunch with our kids on a Saturday and you know what? There's a leak at the church and I gotta go take care of it. That is a pain of ministry. There is a death that pulls me away from home. An elder meeting, another one. Pain in ministry. So we gotta be able to name that. Sometimes in families we only name the pain, but we don't actually name the privilege so our kids don't see that.

So that opportunity to be at that lake house, that is a privilege. That opportunity to go to the game, that's a privilege. I always wanted our kids to know that. And also here's a promise. Here's that simple promise that God tells us he's with us. He's for us. He's got our backs. We just got to continue. So those are that, that was a little bit of a baseline, but here's the, the, the piece I realized. And it was towards the end of our time in the desert.

We had, we all as a family had the mantra, we want to be healthy. We want to grieve, breathe, receive, and we want to create beautiful things. That was kind of our three headed monster we were going after. But what I realized was I was getting opportunities that my wife wasn't getting. And a pastor in Colorado pulled me aside and he said this, he said,

You can have first hand wounding and you can have second hand wounding. You can have firsthand healing, but you can't have second hand healing. And I thought that was one of the most remarkable phrases. And what he's saying is like, often when we get hurt, mama bear at home, she feels that she feels that. And then we make it right with that person. And there's reconciliation.

Mark Turman (51:22.67)

wow.

Mark Turman (51:27.63)

Hmm.

//stevecarter (51:39.424)

but she hasn't made that right. Or she's had to actually walk with the kids and is a frontline parent often and have to hear what their experience because of a transition or a friend, their friend whose parent just left staff or just left the church. And it's like, why did they leave? Like they're having to carry all of that. And so the piece that I would just stress is, just because you get opportunities, do whatever you can to have first hand and second hand healing together. And it's not always gonna be able to be that way because we heal differently, but the more that you can do that together, the better off you'll be.

Mark Turman (52:16.43)

Mm. Wow.

Mark Turman (52:25.87)

Yeah. And, and so true, right. Because it just works in so many weird ways. our spouses experienced so much of the pain, but they don't get to be in the meetings. They, you know, there's, and there's no way to convey to them the exact tone, intense and sense of what the meeting was, you know, whether it was the trauma meeting or the recovery meeting, or there's just no way for them. Cause they're not in the meetings. and, and finding ways, thinking deeply about how.

to bring them to a place where they can have that firsthand experience of healing. and it's just something we've got to get better at. It's just something we have to get better at. Man, Steve, I'd love to keep talking. It's such a great, great resource. And I just love your spirit about it. The book is called grieve, breathe and receive finding a faith strong enough to hold us. Wow. What a great subtitle as well. That Steve Carter, Steve, tell us, what are you doing now? Obviously you're writing.

//stevecarter (53:02.624)

Thank you, Reader.

//stevecarter (53:06.72)

Thank you.

Mark Turman (53:24.174)

I know you have a podcast. Tell us a little bit about that. What are you, where can we find you? What are you doing now? if people want to follow along after your ministry.

//stevecarter (53:33.664)

Yeah, thank you so much. And thanks for having me. It was such an honor to be on this podcast. And again, love what you guys are about. You can find more information at [SteveCarter .org](http://SteveCarter.org) and there you'll see links to the book. But I teach at Forest City Church that's in Chicagoland in Elgin and Rockford. Love that. And then I host the Craft and Character podcast and really just helping people get better at the craft of communication while always hoping and ensuring that their character leads the way. So [SteveCarter .org](http://SteveCarter.org), you can find me there.

Mark Turman (54:08.302)

All right. Thanks a lot, Steve. And we want to thank all of our audience for listening. Thank you for being a part of this conversation. If you want to find more resources from us, you can go to the denisonforum.org page.. And we look forward to seeing you next time on the Denison Forum podcast. Thanks.