

## TURNING IS HARDER THAN WANTING

22 February 2026

### SUMMARY:

This Lenten message challenges believers to examine whether they are living as God has called them to be, rather than settling for less than His vision for their lives. Bruce Downes emphasizes that repentance is not about feeling bad, but about reorienting one's life toward God's purposes. Drawing from Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness and the man at the pool of Bethesda, the message explores how God tests us in difficult seasons to reveal who we truly are beneath our "presentation face." The message calls for deep introspection during Lent, urging the congregation to "choose life" as Moses commanded Israel, recognizing that turning toward God requires fighting for the promised land rather than waiting for blessings to arrive effortlessly. Bruce Downes vulnerably shares his own struggles with this call, acknowledging that despite doing much ministry work, God continues to call him deeper into holiness and mission.

### KEY POINTS

- Many people wanted more from life but settled for less than God's vision for them.
- Repentance means changing your mind in such a way that your direction changes. It is reorientation, not groveling.
- God tests us in wilderness seasons to reveal who we truly are when we are tired, hungry, or overlooked.
- Jesus' three temptations in the desert were fundamentally about trust: trusting God rather than self-sufficiency, spectacle, or power.
- Lent asks the annual question: "Are you who God is calling you to be?"
- Moses told Israel to "choose life" before entering the Promised Land. The Church gives us Lent to make the same choice.
- Every promised land requires fighting for it; blessings don't come without effort and sacrifice.
- We cannot do Christian living alone; we need others to help us walk in holiness.
- Turning toward God means you cannot remain facing the opposite direction and still receive what He offers.
- Retired people are not excused from God's call; young people shouldn't assume they have unlimited time.

**SCRIPTURE REFERENCES:**

- Hebrews 4:12 - "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword"
- Habakkuk 2:2 - "Write the vision down so that someone can run with it"
- John 5:1-9 - The man at the pool of Bethesda who had been ill for 38 years
- Luke 4:1-2 - Jesus led by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days of temptation
- Deuteronomy 30:15-19 - Moses' call to "choose life and prosperity" or "death and adversity"
- Mark 1:15 - "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news"

## TURNING IS HARDER THAN WANTING

### **SMALL GROUP GUIDE**

This guide is designed to help your small group dive deeper into the message.

### **OPENING PRAYER**

Invite the Holy Spirit to guide your discussion and open hearts to God's transforming work during this Lenten season. Pray the IMPACTERS Community Prayer .

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

#### **1. The Gap Between Wanting and Being**

**Key Quote:** *"I've asked so many people through the years, did you think your life would be what it is right now? When you thought of yourself years ago, did you think you would look like that? Did you think you would have achieved what you did?"*

##### **Discussion Questions:**

- What did you want to be when you were younger? How does that compare to who you are today?
- In what areas of your life have you "settled for less" when you wanted more?
- What's the difference between being disappointed with yourself and being honest with yourself before God?

#### **2. The Challenge of Repentance**

**Key Quote:** *"Repentance means to change the mind in such a way that your direction changes. It means reorientation. It means to turn because something greater has come near."*

##### **Discussion Questions:**

- How would you define repentance in your own words? How is it different from just feeling guilty?
- The sermon mentioned that repentance is about alignment with God, not groveling. How does this perspective change how you approach confession and change?
- Jesus asked the man at Bethesda, "Do you want to be made well?" but the man gave excuses instead. What excuses do we commonly make for not changing?

#### **3. The Desert Test: Trust vs. Self-Reliance**

**Key Quote:** *"The issue of Jesus in the desert and three temptations, the temptation is one of trust. Do you trust me?"*

##### **Jesus' Three Temptations:**

1. Turn stones to bread (self-sufficiency)
2. Throw yourself down (prove yourself/spectacle)
3. Worship me for power (control)

**Discussion Questions:**

- Which of these three temptations do you most struggle with in your own life?
- The sermon contrasted earthly security with divine risk. Share a time when God asked you to trust Him in a way that felt risky or uncomfortable.
- How do we know the difference between wisdom/prudence and fear-based self-protection?

**4. Choose**

**Key Quote:** *"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity... choose life so that you and your descendants may live."*

**Discussion Questions:**

- Moses told the Israelites to "choose life." What does "choosing life" look like practically in your daily routine?
- The sermon asked: "If I live the next 10 years the way I've lived the last seven days, who will I become?" Take a moment to honestly reflect on this question.
- What "death and adversity" patterns have you been tolerating in your life that God is calling you to leave behind?

**5. No Excuses: For All Ages**

**Key Quote:** *"Retired people excuse themselves from the work of God because they say, I'm too old... You're not excused. And for young people, the challenge is... You've got time. You've got time. You've got time."*

**Discussion Questions:**

- What excuses do you make for not being who God has called you to be? (Too old, too young, too busy, too broken, etc.)
- How can this group help hold each other accountable to stop making excuses?
- Who in your life doesn't know Jesus? What's preventing you from sharing your faith with them?

**PRACTICAL APPLICATION**

**Individual Commitments:**

**This Week:**

- **Daily Prayer:** Each morning this week, ask God: "Am I who You're calling me to be today?"
- **Lenten Practice:** If you haven't already, choose a Lenten practice (fasting, prayer, almsgiving) that will serve as a reminder to pursue holiness
- **The Business Card Challenge:** Like the pastor mentioned, carry something (business card, prayer card, rosary) as a reminder that you're ready to share Jesus anywhere, anytime

**This Month:**

- **Find an Accountability Partner:** Invite someone to have coffee and share honestly about your spiritual life
- **Identify One Area for Repentance:** Choose one specific area where you need to "change your mind" and create a concrete plan for transformation

#### **Group Commitments:**

- **Share Life Together:** Consider meeting outside of small group time—for a meal, coffee, or service project
- **Pray for Each Other:** Exchange one specific prayer request related to becoming who God has called you to be
- **Support the Youth Ministry:** Consider how your group can support the youth camp initiative mentioned in the sermon

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

*Loving Father, as the Church brings us into this season where it reminds us to choose life and not death and adversity, help us to truly experience You. Allow us to stand in the place You've called us to be. Give us courage to turn from our settled ways toward Your calling. We make this prayer in Jesus' name, through the power of Your Holy Spirit. Amen."*

#### **LEADER NOTES**

- **Create safety:** Emphasize that this is a season of honest examination, not condemnation
- **Model vulnerability:** Leaders should be willing to share their own struggles with settling or making excuses
- **Avoid fixing:** When people share struggles, resist the urge to immediately offer solutions—sometimes people need to sit with the discomfort
- **Remember grace:** Balance the call to repentance with the reminder that God's grace empowers change
- **Encourage specificity:** Help people move from general statements to specific, actionable commitments