

LEARNING TO REMAIN

09 AUGUST 2026

SUMMARY

Drawing from John 15:1-11 and Psalm 27, this Message explores what it truly means to abide in God's presence not merely as an occasional spiritual experience, but as a continuous, conscious way of life. Bruce Downes challenges listeners to move beyond a Christianity defined by external religious activity and to discover that God has already drawn near and dwells within. Through the teaching of St. Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle and the concept of "mutual remaining" drawn from Jesus's farewell discourse to His disciples, the Message calls believers to practice a deliberate, daily rhythm of returning their attention to God throughout every ordinary moment. The Message emphasizes that spiritual maturity is not achieved quickly but is a lifelong interior transformation built on the awareness that Christ is already present within us through baptism, the Holy Spirit, Scripture, and the sacraments.

KEY POINTS

- David's prayer in Psalm 27 distills the entire spiritual life to one essential desire: to dwell in the presence of God above all other needs or accomplishments
- Jesus speaks the words "abide in me" at the precise moment He is about to leave, promising a communion with Him that transcends changing circumstances
- The Christian life is not an anxious attempt to cling to a distant God, but an awakening to a communion that is already happening within us through baptism, the Holy Spirit, the Word, and the Eucharist
- St. Teresa of Avila's image of the Interior Castle teaches that God already dwells at the centre of the soul, and the spiritual journey is one of turning inward to discover His presence there
- Many Christians do not deliberately forget God but simply become occupied and lose conscious awareness of His presence throughout the day
- Spiritual maturity is best described as learning to return, the small interior act of consciously redirecting heart and mind toward God who is already present
- Returning and remaining is a practice that applies across every circumstance: work, anxiety, hurt, joy, decision-making, and fatigue
- Pruning is part of remaining in God; His presence does not always comfort but sometimes exposes anxiety, resentment, and unhealthy attachments
- The goal of the missionary of His presence is not to carry a special gift of God's presence but to carry an awareness of it into every environment
- Practical homework is given: return consciously to an awareness of God's presence at least 12 times per day for one week, understanding that the full interior transformation takes years

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES:

- John 15:1-11, in which Jesus describes Himself as the true vine and His followers as the branches, calling them to abide in Him as He abides in them, promising that apart from Him nothing can be accomplished
- Psalm 27, in which David expresses that his one deepest desire above all others is to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of his life and behold His beauty

STORIES:

- Bruce Downes reflects on his father, who would have turned 100 years old on the day of the Message, recalling how watching his father age and pass away revealed how many things that once seemed important gradually lost their significance, drawing a parallel to David's distillation of life to one essential longing
- Bruce Downes honestly recounts his years doing youth ministry, acknowledging that he wrongly majored on presentation, music quality, and the external appearance of church life, and that this built faith on sand rather than on the interior foundation of God's presence within
- St. Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle is described: the soul is imagined as a magnificent castle with many rooms, and the King dwells at the very centre, yet many people spend their lives outside the castle entirely, never entering within to discover God already dwelling there
- Bruce Downes shares a personal confession about being an activist by nature, admitting that he tends to skip morning prayer in favour of productivity and then finds himself too tired or distracted to pray later in the day, illustrating the common human tendency the Catechism describes as forgetting the One who is our life and our all

LEARNING TO REMAIN

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. Pray the IMPACTERS Community Prayer .

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Section 1: One Thing

1. The Message referenced Psalm 27, where David names one deepest desire above all others: to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of his life. If you were honest, what would you say is the one thing that most shapes how you actually live day to day? How does that compare to what you would want it to be?
2. Bruce Downes reflected on watching his father age and realizing, in hindsight, that many things he had thought were important simply were not. Have you had a similar experience, a moment where your sense of what truly matters shifted? What brought that about?
3. What do you think it means, practically, to desire God above everything else? What does that look like on an ordinary Tuesday?

Section 2: Already Within

4. The Message made the point that the Christian life begins by awakening to a communion with God that is already happening. Through baptism, the Holy Spirit, the Word, and the sacramental life of the Church, God has already drawn near. Does that idea feel real to you, or does it feel more like a theological statement than a lived experience? Why?
5. St. Teresa of Avila described the soul as a beautiful castle with many rooms, and God dwelling at the very centre. She observed that many good Christian people spend most of their lives outside the castle, preoccupied with everything around them rather than turning inward. Do you recognize that tendency in yourself? What tends to keep you outside?
6. Bruce Downes admitted that earlier in his ministry he built foundations for people's faith that were more about presentation, atmosphere, and external experience than about an interior life with God. Have you ever found that your own faith was resting on something external that eventually shifted or disappeared? What happened?

Section 3: Returning and Remaining

7. The Message described returning as "that small interior moment in which we remember again, God is here and I am here with Him." What does that kind of return look like for you in practice? Is it something you already do, even informally?

8. Bruce Downes listed several moments throughout an ordinary day where returning and remaining could happen: before a meeting, in the middle of anxiety, when someone hurts us, when something wonderful happens, when we walk through the front door tired at the end of the day. Which of those moments feels most difficult for you? Which feels most natural?
9. The Message drew a distinction between a Christian life that begins and ends with a morning prayer and a night prayer, and one where everything throughout the day is lived within God rather than independently of Him. How would you describe the rhythm of your own prayer life right now? Is it more like bookends, or something more woven through the day?

Section 4: Pruning

10. The Message noted that remaining in God does not always feel peaceful. Sometimes His presence exposes rather than comforts. It can bring anxiety, resentment, or unhealthy attachments to the surface. Have you experienced that kind of exposure in prayer? How did you respond to it?
11. Bruce Downes said that prayer begins to show us the activities and attachments that take us away from God. Is there anything in your life right now that you sense, when you are quiet before God, has more of a hold on you than you would like?

Section 5: The Long Journey

12. The Message was honest that this is not something that gets resolved quickly. Bruce Downes said that the conversion of the interior takes years, not weeks. How do you feel about that kind of long, slow transformation? Does it discourage you, or does it give you permission to be patient with yourself?
13. Bruce Downes described being called to be missionaries of God's presence, not because we carry more of His presence than others, but because we carry an awareness of His presence. What do you think it would look like for your ordinary life, your workplace, your home, your conversations, to be shaped by that kind of awareness?

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

This Week's Practice

The Message gave a specific homework assignment: practice returning to an awareness of God's presence at least 12 times each day for the coming week.

This does not need to be a lengthy prayer. It can be as simple as a single interior moment: a pause, a breath, and a quiet acknowledgement, "He is with me. I am with Him."

Suggested moments to practice returning:

- When you first wake up
- Before checking your phone or email
- Before a conversation or meeting

- When you feel anxious or frustrated
- When something good happens
- When you move from one task to another
- Before a meal
- When you walk into a room
- When you feel the pull of distraction
- At the end of the working day
- When you arrive home
- Before you sleep

For your journal or personal reflection this week:

- At the end of each day, note briefly: How many times did I return? What made it easy? What made it hard?
- Was there a moment this week when returning to His presence changed how you responded to something?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, we do not always know how to remain. We get distracted, we get busy, we forget. But you do not forget us. You remain in us even when we are unaware. Teach us to return. Teach us to stay. And in the long, slow work of transformation, make us people who carry an awareness of your presence wherever we go. Amen.