



We don't have to be afraid of liturgy and sacraments. These ancient ways of engaging with Scripture and faith help us see the beauty and taste the grace of heaven through the incarnation of Jesus. This book is an evangelical introduction to the theological framework of the sacramental life.

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# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	
<i>Bearing Fruit in a Time of Drought</i>	11
<b>1. My Story</b>	
<i>The Weary and the Heavy-Laden</i>	17
<b>2. Eucharist</b>	
<i>Recovering Our Vision of Christ and Creation</i>	25
<b>3. Baptism</b>	
<i>A Waterlogged Community for Lonely Hearts</i>	39
<b>4. Time</b>	
<i>Fixing Our Clocks and Calendars on Jesus Christ</i>	51
<b>5. Scripture, Creeds, and Old Prayers</b>	
<i>Stability for Uncertain Times</i>	73
<b>6. Liturgy</b>	
<i>The Joy of Heaven for People on Earth</i>	93
<b>7. Passing the Peace</b>	
<i>Christian Unity in a Divided World</i>	113
<b>8. The Prayers of the People</b>	
<i>Bonfire of the Anxieties</i>	127
<b>9. Mission</b>	
<i>For the Life of the World</i>	151
<b>10. Courage</b>	
<i>Faithfulness in Crisis</i>	167
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	183
<b>Notes</b>	185
<b>About the Author</b>	199

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# I

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## MY STORY

### THE WEARY AND THE HEAVY-LADEN

Strange as it sounds, it was Christianity that almost killed my Christian faith—not because it was so bad, but because it was so good. It excited me, taught me, challenged me, encouraged me, and put me to work for the gospel—until I collapsed.

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I ran up all nineteen floors to reach my dorm room on my first day of Bible college.

As an eighteen-year-old freshman at Moody Bible Institute, I was thrilled to expand my horizons. For years I had been a frustrated extrovert in a small Ohio town, subsisting on a Bible church youth group and Christian radio. Now that I was in the big city, among peers who shared my faith and level of earnest

desire to serve the Lord, I didn't mind the nineteen floors—not at first.

Whatever the evangelical college program was, I was there for it: the new friends, the daily chapel sessions featuring sermons from notable pastors, the Christian concerts, the Bible and theology classes, the Christian-themed improv group, the late-night conversations in the dorm lounge, the city evangelism and justice initiatives, the Cubs games and Chicago hot dogs, even the accountability partners.

For a while, everything worked. My professors deepened my appreciation for the Bible and awakened me intellectually. My devotional life only got better as a result. My peers provided the iron-sharpening-iron spiritual community. The worship and prayer nights stoked my passion for God. My head and my heart soaked all of it up like water and sunshine. I was growing. This was the Christian life, and I didn't want it to end.

For someone who came to faith in Christ at the age of five and grew up in a Christian home, this was perhaps the closest I came to a conversion experience. I give thanks to God for it. The joy and discovery of that season cut a deeper channel in my soul that remains to this day.

As the year drew to a close, my dorm leader took me under his wing and encouraged me to get involved in student leadership. There was a shortage of applicants for the leadership vacancies, he said, and I was mature enough to step in to fill the gap. I would learn later in life that there is usually a shortage of mature, capable leaders where they are most needed—and that need does not constitute a call. But at the time, I was deeply honored by the

invitation. Who better to come to the rescue than me, the one who had the enthusiasm to run up all nineteen floors on my first day?

After being put into leadership, I poured everything I had into this opportunity. I prayed for God to give me vision. I made an elaborate, knock-'em-dead mural out of construction paper and colored tissue to communicate the vision. I spent time working the vision into a discipleship cohort of moldable freshman. I hoped to replicate in them the joyful experience I'd enjoyed the previous year.

And then it happened. I'll never forget the phone call from my close friend at the time: "Aaron, my dad took his own life." I didn't know what to say. I hadn't seen this coming at all. My friend's family had seemed so happy and healthy to me. They were committed Christians, involved in their own church. I had never heard much about Christians committing suicide. The reality of this death was like an intruder in my otherwise happy existence.

At the time, my friends and I had been attending a new, large, growing Bible church. The worship was upbeat, the architecture was innovative (church in a former warehouse? Cool at the time!), and our pastor had the "it" factor. He mesmerized us for nearly an hour each Sunday with his bold, in-your-face expository preaching. The services were like a roller coaster ride at an amusement park: they left us feeling thrilled, special, angry, tender, guilty, and loved—sometimes in the same service. We didn't always know what Sunday would hold, but it was bound to be interesting. Given how fast the church was growing, we carried this sense that our pastor would eventually get big and discovered, and then our church would get big and discovered,

which would be even more exciting and special. We filled the huge parking lot with cars and the huge warehouse with people every Sunday, several times over.

Yet after the suicide, we didn't so much need space to park the car as much as we needed a space to grieve the loss. We needed a space to be still before God, free of unnecessary noise and provocative personalities. We needed space from the happy and produced experiences so that our messy and human experiences could run their course. We needed space not to have to feel anything at all—but simply to be welcomed into the presence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Meanwhile, my coursework changed to a minor key. As I learned how the Bible was written, collected, and held together, I grew disenchanted with it. I began to stand over God's living Word, analyzing it from new angles, less and less interested in its power to refresh and convict. Even the tamest of exposures to postmodernism and critiques of the Christian faith—from believing, faithful professors—left me questioning all I had trusted. The more I learned, the less I believed. I felt like a bad Christian for entertaining these doubts and didn't share those concerns with many people.

And that's when the criticisms started from the ministry I was leading. I didn't have a healthy way to process the negative feedback. I could only feel the raw shame, fear, and hurt of getting dinged as a leader. "He's not investing in us enough . . . We don't like his vision . . . He's made some bad decisions." These words stung. *After all I've done to help and lead them!* I fumed to myself.

It seemed that the entire world I had flourished in was turning

against me. Instead of changing course, I doubled down into more of the same: more quiet times, more worship music, more sermons, more ministry initiatives, more theology—more learning, feeling, and trying. My friend David, a former Christian college chaplain, calls this the learn-more-do-more treadmill. Struggling in your faith? Learn more. In a relational crisis? Do more. It's worked before; it should work again. It was like attempting those nineteen flights of steps, except this time I collapsed before I reached the top.

With my emotions fried, my thoughts confused, my energy for Christian service depleted, I was hitting a wall and experiencing a true crisis of faith. I couldn't feel my way to God anymore—not in my old way of doing that, at least. I couldn't think and learn my way to God through quiet times or theology books, and I couldn't serve and lead my way to God. Yet I longed for God.

Around that time my friend Phil invited me to a church called Covenant Presbyterian, a reformed congregation in Chicago's Bucktown neighborhood. Covenant met in a converted century-old Polish Catholic church building. It was austere—no statues of saints remained—with cracked walls and unreasonably stiff pew benches. Yet

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the architecture was beautiful and sturdy, and it lifted my gaze heavenward.

Within these old stone walls and old stained glass, I was given old prayers to pray. This is maybe the moment I learned that the church could be like a mother. Mothers tend to know what their kids need the moment they walk through the door: “Come on in. Here’s a chair for your tired body. You must be famished; here’s a plate of dinner. I’ve got your bed ready, but first, a hug. Bring it in.”

I arrived at Covenant’s front steps weary and heavy-laden. My mind, heart, and energies were all burned out. She welcomed me like a son to be loved, not a customer to be managed. “Here, try these prayers. You don’t have to come up with new ones. They are all just Scripture, stitched together with prepositions. You don’t have to feel them or even believe them at first. Just take your seat and pray with the family.” In my state of burnout, I could receive a set of prayers as beautiful and ancient as the architecture. As I prayed, the prayers lifted my soul heavenward, too.

It’s funny, I had always heard that liturgy and formalities in church were works-based salvation: an empty set of rituals that alienated people from the grace of Jesus. Yet for me, it was the opposite. The historic forms and seasons of the church, including the church calendar and frequent Communion, put the grace of Jesus on full display. It gave me a way to participate in that grace with my kneeling knees, my gazing eyes, my chewing mouth, and my praying voice. It was like that “easy yoke” Jesus talked about with His disciples. It fit, light and easy-like; the longer I wore it, the more I learned of His gentle and lowly heart for me—not just in my head, but in my muscle memory. My soul started to rest, week by week.



It might sound as if I'm describing the perfect church, but it wasn't. More importantly, the church didn't need to be perfect; perfect was what had exhausted me in the first place. I had begun to sour on perfect, produced, and passionate worship experiences. I didn't need the church to deliver premium religious goods and services in exchange for my tithe dollars (which, let's be honest, weren't considerable to begin with). I needed Jesus, in all His simplicity and beauty. The liturgical, historic forms of worship gave me Jesus. The sermon did not have to be the main event that draws everyone back the next week. The preaching could simply be the gospel verbalized, and the sacraments (the Lord's Table and baptism) could be the gospel visualized, working in tandem. And the church could be that mother with crinkly eyes and open arms, standing on the porch like Lady Wisdom, crying out, "Come and see the gospel! Come and taste the gospel! Come and pray the gospel! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price!"

Looking back, I was still a hot mess with plenty of issues. Liturgy is not a panacea for the human condition. But it's a start. I was like a sapling, already bent over and misshapen, lashed next to a giant, healthy tree, all the while being husbanded by the Holy Spirit. The roots would deepen slowly; the fruit would eventually appear. And my head and my heart would eventually catch up with my body. But first, I needed to rest, receive, and slow down. Liturgy—a central part of the sacramental life—helped me do that.

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to rest.

## EARTH FILLED WITH HEAVEN

As I've talked to other Christians, I've realized I'm not all that unique. Even the most zealous believers slam into challenges, or seasons of doubt and dryness, that leave them aching for more. They need to rest and heal, recover their head and their heart, and in the process receive a new vision of Christ and His church.

Where can weary and heavy-laden believers begin to look for this kind of recovery? The easy yoke of the ancient church can strengthen our faith after the world, the flesh, and the devil have done their best to strangle it altogether. The church's creeds and calendar, the passing of the peace and praying old prayers, and even a few strange customs work together to create a pattern of worship and prayer that sustains the church's mission and a life of courage. A strong place to start is with the basics—the sacraments themselves.

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