Listen to one of the most disturbing verses in the entire Bible, a verse that instantly jars our usual conception of God, our usual conception of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, God is announcing His plans to send Jesus to earth to offer the gospel of grace to sinful people, and in announcing His plan, here’s what He says, “‘I want you to understand,’ God says. ‘It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I’m going to do these things, but for the sake of My holy name.’” The gospel is not primarily for my sake or for your sake. The Gospel of Christ is primarily for the sake of God’s holy name. What is all that about? I thought Jesus came to get me to heaven so I could be happy forever. And that is, by the grace of God, wonderfully included, but it’s not the center.

What I hear God saying in this verse—and this relates to the purpose of SoulCare conversations that we touched on in our last presentation—what I hear God saying in this verse is this: “In the gospel, I’m going to give you provisions. I’m going to give you everything you need to accomplish the purpose that I know is best. I’m going to give you everything you need, not to see to it you suffer less. I’m going to give you everything you need, not to see to it every relationship you have with your spouse or your children or your friends goes well. I’m going to give you everything you need, not to see to it that your ministry and your church and your job and your health and your income all turn out just the way you want them to. I’m going to give you everything you need to reveal what I’m like to everyone who meets you. I’m going to give you everything you need to reveal the character that is Mine, this marvelous, loving, gracious, beautiful, perfect character—everything you need to reveal My character to other people. And as you do that, I receive glory, that brings Me pleasure, and you win as well.” It’s a win-win-win situation, because glory goes to God, joy comes to me, and community forms.
Folks, the purpose of SoulCare conversations is not what I fear we often think it is. The purpose of SoulCare conversations is not to get people to feel good about themselves. The purpose of SoulCare conversations is not to take a damaged soul and to get them to feel healthy and whole. The purpose of a SoulCare conversation is to put people in touch with the provisions that the gospel has supplied in order for us to achieve the purposes of God, and His central purpose is not less suffering and better feelings for me right now; His central purpose is, whatever happens in my life, when the cancer comes, when the divorce takes place, when the child rebels, the only guarantee I have is I have the resources to enjoy God in the middle of the mess and to enjoy Him so much that I’m consumed with the purpose of wanting to reveal what He’s like, even when life is bad and everything falls apart. Now, that’s a pretty high purpose.

The question naturally follows, “So exactly how do we do this? What does a SoulCare conversation look like? I think I know what a social conversation is; I know how to have a good time. I think I know what a task-centered conversation is. I’ve served on committee meetings; I’m a deacon in my church. I think I know what an informational conversation is like; I teach a Sunday School class, or I go to sermons on Sunday morning and I learn certain things, but you’re talking about a kind of conversation that really doesn’t happen very much—where people are agreed to come together for the singular central purpose of honoring the agenda of the gospel that I enjoy Him no matter what’s happening to the degree that even when I’m feeling sad, depressed, worried, scared, there’s a reality beneath all that that actually makes me want to reveal what He’s like to you, no matter what’s happening in my life.” That’s SoulCare. To help people enjoy and reveal Jesus Christ.

SoulCare conversations, unlike social conversations, or maybe more particularly task-centered and informational conversations, SoulCare conversations don’t follow clear steps. But they do flow according to a rhythm. I would love to see us become comfortable with the word mysticism. I would love to see us become comfortable with the idea that in SoulCare conversations there is a mystical flow, in the sense that a SoulCare conversation does not follow a pre-planned method. What happens in a genuine encounter between two people when SoulCare is taking place—and by the grace of God I’ve been there a time or two—when SoulCare conversations take place, I never walk away from them saying, “I did it right.” I never walk
away from it saying, “I followed the model. I’ve got the steps down pat.” I walk away from it saying, “God showed up. The Spirit was there. Isn’t this neat? This is fun.” There’s a rhythm to SoulCare conversations that depends on the presence of the Spirit, because what happens in a genuine encounter between two souls that is ruled by the passions of the Spirit, what happens is neither fully predictable nor completely manageable. Now, there are things we can do and things we can think about and this course has a lot to do with, think about this—interior world passions, and wisdom of what’s happening in this person, and think vision—all those are ideas to think about, but there’s a rhythm that transcends whatever method you might come up with.

If you try to reduce SoulCare to a technique or a formula, either you’ll miss the person you’re talking to or you’ll go crazy trying to stick with your game plan. In reflecting on the freedom and mystery of the journey to God, G.K. Chesterton, the well-known English writer and thinker, and columnist actually, observed that there’s a rhythm in the journey of walking toward God, and I would think he would include there’s a rhythm in the journey of two people walking together toward God, where there’s a flow that defies order. You will not get a clear order. The way Chesterton put it was this. He said that when you walk the pathway to God you’ll experience the following: “Chess players will go mad. Poets never do.”

Approach SoulCare the way you approach a game of chess and you’ll go mad. It doesn’t work that way. Approach it the way a poet approaches life, thinking about the rhythm, the flow, capturing the beauty, capturing the awfulness, capturing the whole picture of what’s going on and somehow putting it together into words under some creative impulse. Be a poet when you’re engaging in SoulCare, and perhaps the SoulCare will be more effective.

God tells us through Paul in Ephesians that we’re God’s poetry. We’re His workmanship. We’re His poetry created in Christ Jesus for good works. But it’s poetry He’s talking about. And what I believe He’s saying is you and I can learn to flow with the rhythm of the Spirit as He moves us more and more along the path towards spiritual formation. SoulCare conversations must enter the flow, must enter the rhythm. That’s why my interior passions are so crucial when I’m engaging in SoulCare, because I’ve got to be tagging along with the Spirit and sensing
His impulses and feeling His movement and sensing that the wind is blowing and adjusting my sails accordingly so that the flow of the conversation is a spiritual process as opposed to a mechanical process.

So, therefore, let me invite you to do what I must do, and to mutually embrace our inadequacy. I’d like to suggest that you tune into your right brain as well as your left and listen for the Spirit. I’d like to invite you, as we move into discussing the provisions and the practice of SoulCare and seeing what the provisions really are that God has made for a good SoulCare conversation, I’d like to suggest that as you continue listening in this learning conversation, that something in you quiets. Can you quiet yourself? Can you just relax for a moment and visualize yourself by still waters? Can you relax in the stillness of God’s presence as we engage in spiritually-forming conversations that are, in fact, SoulCare? And as we approach them through an informational type of conversation where I talk to you and you listen, I ask that by the power of the Spirit of God that even now as you listen to me teach, and as I teach, that together we’ll flow along with the rhythm of the Spirit.

As we look maybe for a moment at a little case study, as we think about an actual conversation that I recently participated in, and look at a few elements in it to see if we can’t capture some of the rhythm of what a SoulCare conversation might look like, and as we seek to understand the rhythm of a SoulCare conversation, I urge you to get ready for the climax and the poetry when the provisions that God has made for spiritual formation explode. When somehow in the middle of a conversation where journeying realities are talked about, where we feel inadequate, where we’re thinking vision and thinking flesh dynamics and reframing into the story of the soul and trying to get all of this figured out in our heads, but in the middle of it all become comfortable enough with these ideas to no longer let them be our master, but let them be our helper as we yield only to the master of the Spirit.

Maybe at some point the provisions that God has placed on our soul will explode and the holy tension will yield to a holy joy.

Let me suggest that there are several movements to the rhythm of spiritual conversation.

Movement number one: The opportunity for SoulCare presents
itself when? Well, when you hang up a shingle and a person calls a secretary and schedules an appointment. That’s okay. I do that. I don’t think it’s a bad thing. But there’s no guarantee SoulCare will take place because somebody schedules an appointment with the therapist. It may, but it doesn’t always happen.

The opportunity for SoulCare presents itself when someone senses enough grace in your spirit, when someone senses enough of a non-judgmental excitement over what they could become because of grace, to feel safe with you. Not to assume that you’re never going to find fault because there’s faults that sometimes need to be identified and sometimes pretty clearly and strongly. But the SoulCare opportunity happens when someone senses in your spirit that you have tasted grace yourself, that you’ve been stunned by grace in your own life to the point where grace consumes you, and they sense that if they were to share their most shameful secret, that you wouldn’t be thrown into harbor and disgust, but you would say, “Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds, because I have experienced that.”

SoulCare begins when the fragrance of grace encourages the experience of safety in somebody else where they’re willing to share with you where they really are on the journey and drop the posturing. Notice the obvious implication of what I’m saying—that SoulCare begins with the work of grace in your heart, not with a framed certificate on your wall.

A woman says to you—maybe because you’ve chatted together in Sunday School class for the last ten or twenty weeks, or five or ten years—a woman says to you, as you’re walking out the door of Sunday School class, “You know, I just want to say something real quick to you. I’m so mad at my husband. I just can’t be nice to him anymore. He’s really hurt me in some really awful ways and there’s just…the way he’s hurt me. If we would have a chance to talk about it, I’d tell you, but what happened last week is the culmination of a lot of things that have been going on for fifteen years in our marriage. And I’ve got to tell you that what he did last week, something died in me. And I’m just not there. I’ve been trying for years and something died. I’m sorry. I don’t want to burden you with this, but I just had to tell you.” I wonder why. Maybe the safety of grace. Your soul has opened that person to come as they are to another member of the body of Christ in a way that might open them up to the power of grace.

That, I suggest, is the first movement in the rhythm of SoulCare.
Where the fragrance of grace creates the experience of safety that leads to a journeying reality being shared with a member of the body of Christ—movement number one.

The second movement: As that woman shares all this, what happens in you? Look into your own interior world and, if you’re ruled by grace, and if you’re attending to the Spirit and adjusting your sails to the movement of His wind, then what I would suggest is very possible (and I know it doesn’t happen with you all the time; it doesn’t happen with me), but what’s very possible is when the woman shares, “Something’s died within me given what my husband did,” your major response could be excitement. Not, “Well my husband’s causing me troubles too. And I met your husband I never liked him in the first place.” Or, “It seems like you’re being pretty unsubmitive here. And I feel kind of critical of your lack of spirituality.” No, no, no.

It’s possible that when the person shares what’s happening, that your primary response is a sense of excitement that rises within you at that moment, right next to your profound sense of inadequacy (“I have no idea; what do I say to this woman?”), but with the inadequacy rises an excitement. Why? Because you’re celebrating the presence of the Holy Spirit. This woman’s a Christian. You’re a Christian. Don’t ever say that word lightly. You’re a temple of the Spirit. The God of the universe dwells inside of this woman’s heart. He dwells inside of your heart. The Spirit of Christ is present. He doesn’t sleep. He doesn’t take naps. He’s always involved. He’s always doing something, and is there an excitement within you because you’re celebrating the presence of the Holy Spirit at this moment of interaction?

Now it might not be visible. Nobody watching would say, “My what a wonderfully spiritual conversation.” It sounds like one woman grumping to another about a bad marriage. But you have different eyes. You’re fixing your eyes on what is unseen. And you’re saying, “There’s something here by faith that I believe is true.”

Then you enter—in just that moment walking out of Sunday School class—into what I call the practice of wonder. You enter into the practice of wonder. You anticipate the unknown future with joy and with confidence. “What’s ahead?” you ask. And you ask with anticipation because the Spirit is going to complete the work He’s begun in this woman’s heart. It might go through
terrible valleys and trials and difficulties. They might end up getting a divorce. She might end up having affairs. But you stay with her for 20, 30, 40 years and eventually you’ll see the Spirit has worked in this woman’s life because the day is coming, if she knows Jesus, when she’ll stand before Him and He will say, “You’re my child. Welcome home. You are now Mine completely. And you’re visibly Mine.”

The Spirit’s at work. Can you enter the practice of wonder? Can you say, even as the woman grumps angrily and resentfully with no evidence of spiritual fruit about her miserable marriage and what has died in her soul, can you quietly say to yourself, “Aslan’s on the move”? The lion in C.S. Lewis’ Narnia story represents Christ. He’s on the move. Winter is ending. Spring is coming. There’s going to be a leaf budding on that tree pretty soon and I’m going to stick around to watch it grow.

If that’s your mood, then I guarantee that woman’s going to sense it. She’s going to be surprised by it. She might not say it. She’ll be stunned because most everybody else she’s ever shared her problems with—they felt pressured, “What do I say to her?” They joined her in her complaint. “My husband’s no better.” They’ve given her a Bible verse. They’ve said, “Can I have a word of prayer with you?” But there’s not been the deep sense of eagerness and readiness to follow the Spirit as He does that part of His work, which is better done in community than in solitude. That’s the second movement. You’re ready to enter another person’s soul in a way that provokes a tension between the reality of where she is—angry at her husband and dead toward him—and a hunger that the Spirit of God has placed in her soul with which she is completely out of touch right now perhaps.

You’re excited—movement number two.

The third movement in the rhythm of the Spirit. You’re immediately aware that as she’s talking, that more is happening in you than the Spirit’s movements. This holy tension that we’re talking about is not just her issue, it’s yours as well. Other passions then, the passions of the Spirit compete for your attention. Other passions are pressing for controlling you than the passions of the Spirit. You become aware of your own self-centeredness as she’s talking about her problems with her husband. I’m assuming you’re a woman talking with her; perhaps you’re thinking about your husband and the way he’s failed you and how
can you help her—you’re not much of a wife yourself? You’ve had the worst fight of your life just last night. And you long to be powerful, but you don’t know how to do that, and you want to be helpful and you want to impress her and she’s taking the risk of trusting you with this information, and you’re not sure what to do, and all sorts of things are happening in you besides excitement and “Aslan’s on the move,” and the Spirit of God is available. A lot of other things are there, but that’s there too.

Be quiet for a moment and tune into the fact that there’s a tension within you and you’re not what you long to be. You’re not deeply ruled by the Spirit with great joy and peace at this moment. You’re frustrated and worried and feeling inadequate and angry at your own husband, and all that’s happening, but be quiet for a moment and listen to the voice of wisdom. And what you’ll hear is, “You know, the Spirit of God is alive in me and I would like to know Him well, and I don’t know Him nearly as well as I’d like. I come to you, dear sister, with a tension that only the Spirit can resolve and I’d like to see you experience that same tension. Right now you’re not in tension, you’re just mad and feeling kind of justified about it. We’re going to have a SoulCare conversation if God gives the opportunity.”

The third movement is a sense of dependence on the Spirit as you move toward the SoulCare opportunity. You again, in your own life, enter into the cycle of spiritual formation. You become broken over your own sense of failure. You become repentant. “God, what I want so much is to enjoy You and reveal You to this dear lady. What I know is I must abandon myself to Your Spirit, because I can’t make it happen and I have a confidence that You really are there. I had tasted You before. Your Word says that You’re there. Oh God, wouldn’t it be something if the true me, the woman that I really am as a Christian, could be released and what’s alive in me could be poured into her and she could experience a holy tension that would result in her moving through brokenness and repentance and abandonment and confidence and release to be the woman that You’ve made her to be in the middle of this difficult marriage? God, I long for that.” That’s your third movement.

The fourth movement: On the foundations of spiritual passions flowing through you, you enter her soul confident that spiritual wisdom is available. There is a Bible, which tells us what’s going on in our souls, which tells us what’s wrong and tells us what God’s provisions are. And you begin to move now with some
thought that there really is a wisdom that I could interact on the basis of as I chat with this lady. And I can begin to understand more clearly how her flesh is operating. Flesh dynamics now becomes not a technical phrase, but a living reality as I’m experiencing this woman. But more than flesh dynamics, there’s something else within her. There’s a longing for her to be who she’s not. And when she sees that, she’s going to feel a holy tension. That will be the opportunity of the Spirit. “This is exciting. I hope we have a chance to chat. I wonder, could we go out to lunch today? Wouldn’t work today? How about tomorrow? I’d love to chat with you. And could I ask you a question? As you share with me about your husband, I would love to have a chat with you about just what it would mean for the two of us to move toward becoming like Christ more and more, so we could respond to our husbands, and you could respond to yours and me to mine, in a way that is consistent with what God wants us to be. I know that’s what you want. Could we get together for that purpose?”

Now you’ve set up a spiritually forming conversation. Your mind begins to move. You meet the next day. You prepare for it by prayer. You start thinking about being present with her in her journeying reality. You think about being a safe [place] for this woman. You begin thinking about the vision of what actually could happen a week from now, a year from now, a decade from now as she is more spiritually formed. What could this woman look like? How might she talk to me a year from now about the same husband, who fails her the same way, that would be different from the way she’s talking about him now? How could she talk about him then in a way that I would see the fragrance of Christ in her? Because I really didn’t see it much. But I have a vision for what it could be.

I wonder what is wrong with her. What are the flesh dynamics? You might say to her something like, “You can’t imagine, I would think, continuing to feel the way you do with your husband. The hurt you’ve suffered is so profound. But I would think the pain that you’re experiencing, you just don’t want to go on with that for the next year or two or three.” I can see you begin to introduce holy tension by talking about a pain within her soul that’s unbearable, that she’s resolving without the help of the Spirit. She’s resolving her pain by backing away from this guy. By getting busy with more church activities. She’s resolving her pain in wrong sorts of ways and you begin to talk about some of her pain. Not just to empathize, but to introduce
an understanding of how her flesh is operating. You begin to reframe and say, “I’d love to know you even better. I know your husband’s kind of been failing in some pretty bad ways. Tell me about your kids. How about your background? What’s it like with your friends, and we’re kind of new friends—what’s it like to be with me? Tell me about your journey with God. Let’s reframe this into the story of your relational soul.”

You begin to talk about her categories. As you listen to her talk about her story, you begin to think in categories of understanding. What is happening inside this woman? She is a woman who thirsts. What is she thirsting for? I know she thirsts for God, but that’s never come up. It seems to me like what she’s thirsting for more than anything else is a husband who loves her in a particular way. I wonder what her background is like. I wonder if her dad ever treated her warmly when she was a little girl. I wonder what’s going on in this woman. What is her thirst like that is keeping her moving towards some source of joy other than God? What does she believe about joy? What does she believe about the nature of the spiritual journey? Does she not see God as her supreme treasure? What really has been her deepest hurt that she thinks could be relieved if only her husband would treat her well? I wonder if she has eyes for some other man and she’s considering an affair. All that’s possible. What are her choices that she’s making as an image-bearer with relational capacities?

And as you get into all this kind of thinking, as you listen to the story of her soul, you’re going to come to a point where you say, “The Spirit of God is speaking to her right now, but I wonder what He’s saying. Maybe the Spirit of God is saying something along these lines, ‘The core of your being has been radically transformed by the gospel and I long to put you in touch with what is most alive in your soul.’” Is the Spirit saying that? Can you tag along with the Spirit and help her see that as a growing reality? What is happening in her soul that is different because of the gospel? What are the provisions and how do you help put her in touch with what Jesus has already done and is now doing in her soul through the Spirit?