

I Am Speaking to My Son

On limits, burnout, and the discipline of stepping back

In early 1999, I set foot for the first time in the rural Congo — a country torn apart by civil war. I arrived carrying fear, curiosity, and expectation in equal measure. The door to my originally assigned country had closed, forcing more than a year of delays before I finally arrived. By then, my resolve and my expectations had both reached a certain height.

Three Years

The first year passed in a kind of daze — the energy of adapting to a new life carried me forward, and I was too caught up to notice the hardships.

The second year was different. Frustration crept in — the food, the transportation, the language. I missed my sons back in America. When they wrote describing their own difficulties, I was overcome with doubt: *what on earth am I doing here?* Without any real reason, I found myself beginning to resent the local people around me.

By the third year, colleagues and neighbors had grown comfortable enough with us to bring their personal requests more and more frequently. The daily weight of it all had worn me down. And so I began, finally, to protest — to God.

The Prayer of Protest

"God, who do they think we are — that our neighbors bring us requests they should be bringing to You? You know our weakness so well. Why did You send us to this land, only to disappoint these people? Why make us look at them not with love, but with resentment? Either give us the strength — or let us go."

As this kind of protest repeated, I began to feel something close to a victim's grievance — the particular bitterness of someone who believes they have given more than they received.

A Voice at Dawn

Then one early morning, something came to me with unusual clarity — as though I were hearing it spoken directly:

"Listen carefully. I know you feel overwhelmed by the work I have given you. But what I am asking of you is not for you, Simon, to carry alone. I am asking it of my Son Jesus — the one who lives within you. Empty your heart and follow, so that Jesus within you can do the work."

After That

Since then, whenever something comes that I cannot handle on my own, I try to take a moment to step back — one deliberate step. I try to wait, in faith, for the Jesus I had kept dormant to wake up and work.

Even now — when colleagues seem uncooperative, when I feel something is working against what I'm trying to do — I remember that morning in Congo. I try to step back and give Jesus the room.

And every time, the same thought follows:

I should have done that sooner.

Small Group Discussion Guide — Church Community

This story is about burnout, limits, and the paradox discovered at the end of both. For those with faith, it is a story about spiritual formation. The guide below is organized by age group — use whichever fits your group.

Young Adults (20s–35)

Opening (5 min)

- When you face a situation that completely exceeds your capacity, what is your instinct? Push harder, or something else?
- Have you ever brought an honest complaint or protest to God — or wanted to?

Discussion (20 min)

- How does Dr. Park's prayer of protest strike you? Too honest? Recognizable? Would you pray like that?
- "I am not asking this of you, Simon — I am asking it of my Son Jesus within you." What does that mean to you? Is it comforting, or confusing, or both?
- "Stepping back one step" — how is that different from giving up or running away?
- "I should have done that sooner" — what can we learn from that particular kind of regret?
- The second year, Dr. Park found himself resenting the local people around him — without any real cause. Have you noticed how exhaustion or pressure shapes the way you see others?

Scripture (10 min)

Galatians 2:20 — "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."

How does Paul's confession connect to the voice Dr. Park heard that morning? Is this a verse you have understood primarily as theology — or as lived experience?

Application (5 min)

- Is there something you are currently trying to carry on your own that might need one deliberate step back?

Adults (36–60)

Opening (5 min)

- Have you experienced genuine burnout — in work, in family life, in ministry? What did that feel like from the inside?

Discussion (20 min)

- Dr. Park's collapse was gradual — three years of slow erosion. Looking at that arc, what do you recognize from your own experience?
- "The local people began to look hateful to me" — have you experienced how exhaustion distorts the way you see the people around you?
- "Stepping back one step to give Jesus room" — does that create tension with your sense of leadership responsibility? How do you hold both?

- **Dr. Park says this practice has stayed with him long after active service ended. What habits of self-awareness have you carried from one chapter of life into the next?**

Scripture (10 min)

Matthew 11:28–30 — "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest... my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

How does this passage sound to someone in the middle of burnout — as invitation, as rebuke, or as something harder to receive?

Application (5 min)

- **Is there a burden you are carrying alone right now that you could set down — or hand over?**

Seniors (60+)

Opening (5 min)

- **Over a long life, how have you navigated situations where your own strength simply wasn't enough?**

Discussion (20 min)

- **Have you ever prayed a prayer of protest — brought an honest complaint to God? How did that unfold?**
- **"I should have done that sooner" — is that regret, or something else? What does it tell us?**
- **How has your relationship with your own limits shifted over the years? Has it become easier — or harder — to step back?**
- **What would you want to pass on to a younger person about what you have learned at the edge of your own capacity?**

Scripture (10 min)

Psalm 46:10 — "Be still, and know that I am God."

How can stillness — deliberate, chosen stillness — be an act of faith rather than inaction?

Application (5 min)

- **What from today's story stays with you most?**

Small Group Discussion Guide — Community Groups

This guide is for neighborhood groups, workplace teams, reading clubs, or any gathering where people want to think honestly about limits, exhaustion, and what it means to step back without giving up. No faith background is required. The story's central insight — that making space can enable more than pushing harder — belongs to everyone.

Young Adults (20s–35)

Getting In (5 min)

- When you hit a real wall — something completely beyond your capacity — what do you do? Push through, step back, or something else?

Discussion (20 min)

- Dr. Park's burnout followed a recognizable arc: year one — energy and engagement; year two — irritation and doubt; year three — exhaustion and resentment. Does that pattern feel familiar to you?
- "Stepping back one step" — what is the difference between that and quitting or escapism?
- Why is it hard to admit we've reached our limit? What stops us?
- When Dr. Park was exhausted, he started seeing the local people negatively — without cause. Have you noticed how pressure changes the way you perceive the people around you?
- "Creating space" versus "pushing harder" — where have you seen each approach actually work?

Going Further (10 min)

- In psychology, concepts like ego depletion, emotional bandwidth, and mindful surrender describe something similar to what Dr. Park experienced. How useful is it to name burnout in these terms?
- Is "stepping back" a skill that can be practiced? How do you build that capacity?

One Step (5 min)

- Is there something you are currently forcing through on your own that might benefit from a deliberate pause?
- Try this: one day this week, instead of pushing harder when you feel resistance, stop intentionally and wait. Come back and share what happened.

Adults (36–60)

Getting In (5 min)

- Share an experience of genuine professional or personal burnout. What brought it on, and what — if anything — helped?

Discussion (20 min)

- "The local people began to seem hateful to me — without cause." Have you experienced how exhaustion distorts your perception of others? What did that look like?

- As someone in a leadership or responsibility role, does "stepping back one step" feel like irresponsibility? How do you distinguish the two?
- How does "emptying yourself" — creating internal space — actually make better outcomes possible? Where have you seen this in professional life?
- Dr. Park says this discipline has stayed with him long after leaving active service. What practices from intense periods of your life have you carried forward?

Going Further (10 min)

- What would it take for an organization or workplace team to build a culture where stepping back — rather than grinding through — is genuinely valued?
- What is the relationship between self-awareness and effective leadership at the edge of one's limits?

One Step (5 min)

- This week, choose one day to deliberately stop pushing when you feel the wall — and wait instead. Notice what happens.

Seniors (60+)

Getting In (5 min)

- Over a long life, how have you handled situations where your own strength simply wasn't enough? What did you learn?

Discussion (20 min)

- What is the difference between protesting — voicing honest frustration — and giving up? Was Dr. Park's protest a healthy thing?
- As we get older, how does our relationship to our own limits change? Does stepping back become easier, or harder?
- "I should have done that sooner" — is that regret? Wisdom? A gift to someone younger? What do you make of it?
- What would you tell a younger person about what you have learned at the outer edges of your own capacity?

One Step (5 min)

- Share the one thing from today's story that stays with you.

Leader's Guide

For Church Groups and Community Groups

In Dr. Park's Own Words

"Protest was not the opposite of faith. If anything, the honesty was what opened that dawn. I know now that stepping back one step is not the same as giving up. But it is still hard every time. 'I should have done that sooner' — I still say that often."

Reflection questions from Dr. Park:

- **How does Dr. Park's prayer of protest feel to you? Can you identify with it?**
- **How is stepping back different from giving up or running away?**
- **Have you ever pushed hard on your own only to find yourself blocked? What happened?**
- **Is there something you are carrying alone right now that you should set down or hand over?**

What This Story Is Really About

This story has five layers worth holding as you facilitate:

- **Burnout as a process — the slow three-year erosion, not a sudden collapse**
- **The theology of protest — honest complaint as a form of faith, not its failure**
- **Kenosis (self-emptying) — stepping back creates space for something larger to work**
- **Embodied wisdom — this is not theory but insight forged through experience**
- **Ongoing application — the discipline didn't end with active service; it carried forward**

How to Open the Session

Use this question to start — before reading the story, and regardless of the group's faith background:

"When you hit a situation that is completely beyond your own strength — what do you do? Push harder, or something else?"

This question works for everyone. It plants the seed the story will water.

Watch for These Four Risks

Risk 1: The prayer of protest triggers a theological debate

What it looks like: The church group turns to debating whether it is theologically correct to protest before God, and the discussion stalls.

Why it matters: The story's power lies not in the theological validity of protest, but in the fact that honesty was what opened the breakthrough.

Redirect: "When Dr. Park protested, how did God respond? What does that tell us?"

Risk 2: "Stepping back" sounds like irresponsibility

What it looks like: Participants with leadership roles react — "I can't just step back, people are depending on me."

Why it matters: Stepping back is not abandonment; it is creating space for something else to work. The story demonstrates this.

Redirect: "After Dr. Park stepped back — did the work stop, or continue? What did 'emptying' actually make possible?"

Risk 3: Dr. Park gets romanticized as a hero

What it looks like: Participants admire Dr. Park's dedication and move past the uncomfortable parts — the resentment, the victim mentality, the protest.

Why it matters: The story's strength is in its honesty about the dark. Softening that loses the story.

Redirect: "He says the local people began to seem hateful to him — without cause. Why is that confession important to this story?"

Risk 4: Faith language alienates community group participants

What it looks like: "Jesus within you" sounds exclusive or inaccessible to non-faith participants.

Why it matters: The underlying insight — that creating internal space enables something larger than self-effort — is universal.

Redirect: "Setting the faith language aside for a moment — when have you experienced that letting go enabled something your pushing couldn't? Through meditation, delegation, teamwork, or simply rest?"

Closing the Session

- **Personal practice: Ask each person to name one thing they are currently forcing — and to describe what one deliberate step back might actually look like.**
- **Church groups: Read Galatians 2:20 together and sit in silence for a moment at the phrase "I no longer live."**
- **Community groups: Invite a simple commitment — one day this week, when you feel the wall, stop and wait instead of pushing. Come back and share.**

"Protest was not the opposite of faith. The honesty was what opened the dawn."

"I should have done that sooner" — may we learn to step back just a little earlier.