

Leader's Guide

Strengthening the Family

When Pain Becomes a Foothold

Joel DeMott

August 2, 2026

Conversation Goal

To help group members recognize that the condition of their heart shapes every area of their life, identify any places they've withheld from Jesus, and respond by inviting His healing so they can walk in greater freedom and spiritual maturity.

Synopsis

In this message from Ephesians 4, Joel DeMott opens up about a decades-old hurt from a high school baseball coach, and uses it to explore what Scripture says about the anger, bitterness, and pain we carry without realizing it. Drawing from Paul's warning not to "give the devil a foothold," the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, and Paul's call in 2 Corinthians 10 to fight with weapons that aren't of this world, Joel makes the case that there is no neutral ground in the Christian life: we are either moving toward the healing presence of Jesus or hardening our hearts against it. Through honest personal stories this sermon confronts the rooms in our hearts we've told God are off-limits, and invites us to hand them over.

Discussion Question 1

Teaching Point

The Christian life isn't just about changing our behavior, it begins with allowing God to transform our hearts. Left unattended, hurts can slowly harden our hearts, but when surrendered to Christ, they become places where His grace can bring healing and freedom.

Discussion Question

Joel said that "there is no neutral" in the spiritual life; we're either moving toward Christ or drifting away from Him. What do you think he meant by that? How have you experienced your heart becoming either softer or harder over time?

Follow-Up Prompts

- What circumstances tend to make people's hearts grow hard?
- What practices have helped keep your heart tender toward God?
- How can we recognize early signs of spiritual hardening before they become habits?

Additional Scripture

- Proverbs 4:23
 - Hebrews 3:12-13
 - Ezekiel 36:26-27
-

Discussion Question 2

Teaching Point

Paul warns us not to "give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:27). Joel explained that unresolved anger, bitterness, or pain can become an opening where the enemy gains influence; not because God abandons us, but because we're choosing to hold onto what He longs to heal.

Discussion Question

What do you think it looks like in everyday life to "give the devil a foothold"? Why is it often easier to hold onto hurt than to bring it honestly before Jesus?

Follow-Up Prompts

- What are some subtle ways bitterness begins to grow?
- Why do we sometimes convince ourselves we're "fine" when we're not?
- Have you ever realized that unresolved hurt was affecting areas of your life you didn't expect?
- What role does prayer and trusted Christian community play in preventing footholds?
- How does bringing something into the light begin the healing process?

Additional Scripture

- James 4:7-8
 - Psalm 139:23-24
 - 1 Peter 5:8-10
-

Discussion Question 3

Teaching Point

Joel used Cain's story to show that God doesn't ignore our emotions, He invites us to bring them to Him before they master us. The invitation is the same for us today: let Christ shape our heart before pain shapes our character.

Discussion Question

When difficult emotions surface, what usually determines whether they lead us toward God or away from Him? How can we become more intentional about inviting Jesus into those moments?

Follow-Up Prompts

- What is the difference between feeling anger and being controlled by it?
- What helps you process difficult emotions with God?
- How might journaling, prayer, Scripture, or honest conversations with trusted believers help?
- Is there a recurring emotion God may be inviting you to pay closer attention to?

Additional Scripture

- Genesis 4:6-7
 - Psalm 62:8
 - Philippians 4:6-9
-

Discussion Question 4

Teaching Point

Near the end of the message, Joel asked two courageous questions: *"Is there anything in my heart I've kept off limits to God?"* and *"Is there anything I've done that has caused someone else pain?"* Spiritual maturity isn't found in pretending we're fine; it's found in humbly inviting Jesus and trusted believers into the places where we need healing and growth.

Discussion Question

As you reflect on this week's message, where might God be inviting you to take a courageous next step toward healing, freedom, or reconciliation?

Follow-Up Prompts

- Is there an area you've been reluctant to surrender to God? Why?
- Is there someone you trust enough to help you process what God is revealing?
- Joel suggested asking someone, "Is there anything I've done that has hurt you?" What makes that question so difficult?
- Which seems harder for you: admitting you've been hurt or admitting you've hurt someone else?
- What would one step of obedience look like this week?

Additional Scripture

- James 5:16
 - Galatians 6:1-2
 - 2 Corinthians 10:3-5
-

Special Challenge

Joel's message reminded us that freedom doesn't come from ignoring our wounds but from bringing them into the healing presence of Jesus.

This week, set aside 10–15 quiet minutes to pray through Psalm 139:23–24:

"Search me, God, and know my heart... See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

As you pray, ask the Holy Spirit:

- Is there a hurt, anger, jealousy, or disappointment I've been holding onto?
- Is there any part of my heart I've treated as "off limits" to You?
- Is there someone I need to forgive, seek forgiveness from, or invite into this journey of healing?

Then take one tangible step before next week. That step might be:

- Sharing honestly with a trusted Christian friend.
- Writing a prayer of surrender.
- Beginning a difficult but necessary conversation.
- Meeting with a pastor or counselor.
- Committing to pray daily over an area where you long for freedom.